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NOVEL
18



Mushoku Tensei

jobless reincarnation

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Zanoba

Rudeus

Linia

Ginger

Pursena

Juliette

**DRAMATIS
PERSONAE**

**“You have
come from
all corners of
the world to
this university.
Among you, I
am sure there
are some
who have led
lives I cannot
even begin to
imagine.”**

**“However,
while you
reside at this
university, you
are a student
here. That
means you
must conduct
yourself
accordingly
and uphold
our rules.”**



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Seven Seas Entertainment

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*“There are some things in this world that are
permissible and others that are not.”*

—Each person must decide for themselves
what they’re willing to let slide.

AUTHOR: RUDEUS GREYRAT

TRANSLATION: JEAN RF MAGOTT

DIARY

Rudeus • Greyrat

Dearest Paul,

Time marches forward all too quickly. It has already been half a year since those chaotic events in Asura Kingdom transpired. I'm twenty now, which means my little sisters will soon be fourteen.

I have continued to train myself while attending to any work Orsted gives me. Orsted knows nearly everything there is to know, yet he's not the best instructor. I guess he doesn't have the knack for teaching others. On top of that, he refuses to use his mana so he can't demonstrate anything for me, either. He'll teach me the incantation and some tricks for using the spells he's sharing with me, but—and perhaps this is because he's a genius so everything comes naturally to him—most of it doesn't make much sense to me at all.

I'm sure part of the problem is that I'm not a very good student. You can't show me one small part of an equation and expect me to come up with the rest on my own. I'm not *that* brilliant. My memories from my previous life do help me figure out some stuff quickly, but they're pretty much useless when it comes to learning Saint-tier or King-tier spells.

For instance, let's take a look at Flashover, a Saint-tier fire spell that ignites a vast area in an instant. I thought it was like the spell Sizzle in *Dragon Quest*, using light to produce heat. Alas, my intuition was off the mark. Although I cobbled together something similar enough, Orsted responded to my attempts by cocking his head in puzzlement.

Spells aren't the only thing Orsted taught me. He's also shared knowledge, especially that pertaining to fighting against other mages or swordsmen from various schools of swordsmanship. For instance, since the Sword God Style involves the user moving in Pattern A, I should watch out for those and use Strategy B to combat them. If I'm up against a mage proficient in fire magic, they'll likely mostly use Coordination C and Combined Magic D against me, so I should try to

combat those types of spells. And, should I find myself up against a swordsman *and* a mage, then I should use Counter Technique E.

Now that I think about it, he basically taught me combat strategies.

Given my high offensive power, the plethora of spells at my disposal, and the Eye of Foresight, Orsted says my best bet is throwing my enemy off-balance and cornering them, cutting off their options before landing my final blow. That's basically how I've been fighting so far, but I think being self-aware makes the biggest difference.

I've been employing this strategy during practice battles against Eris and on the occasions I teach Sylphie, Norn, and Aisha, just to ensure it's completely ingrained. Thanks to those efforts, my magic has improved immensely: my wind and fire magic is now Saint-tier, as is my healing and detoxification magic, while my divine magic is Intermediate-tier. That's a pretty big jump in only a year.

That said, I still can't quite draw magic circles, and I haven't really touched summoning magic. There's a lot on my to-do list. I may already know a lot of magic, but I can't rest on my laurels; I've gotta keep working at it. At least I have grown a little stronger for now.

My work with Orsted has been going well, perhaps thanks in part to my training. But I haven't really done anything big since the matter with Asura Kingdom. It's small stuff like, "Go to this labyrinth and help this adventurer lost inside it," and, "Go save this merchant who's about to be eaten alive by monsters," and, "Go visit this company and purchase this boy who's become a slave, then sell him off here."

They're mostly menial tasks consisting of helping people out, but I've put all my effort into them. These will apparently be of use

to Orsted in the future. For example, take the dwarven thief I saved the other day named Tal-Chi. She's not personally useful herself, but her son will be the future leader of the Assassins' Guild. He'll eventually assassinate someone that would otherwise become a thorn in Orsted's side. Of course, it would be no trouble for Orsted to kill this person directly if they got in his way, but by orchestrating things in advance, he saves himself precious time and mana. Simply put, changing the past means less trouble in the future.

In all of this, the key to victory rests in Orsted's condition when he finally confronts the Man-God. Having lived through numerous time loops, Orsted already knows what certain people can accomplish if saved from an otherwise untimely demise. Ensuring the safety of those who will do things in his favor will allow him to operate efficiently in the coming generations. In game terms, it's basically controlling variables and fulfilling prerequisites, but in this case, it involves making the right acquaintances.

Anyway, Orsted generally doesn't help out with what I do. He's working on other stuff elsewhere. Setting up things that only he can set up.

The Man-God hasn't interfered much. Or, I should say, he hasn't at all during my solo work. He has been trying to get in the way of what Orsted is doing, which must mean that's far more of a threat to him. In fact, during the times I worked together with Orsted, one or two of the Man-God's apostles have made an appearance in the process. The weird thing is that they've never come in threes, so perhaps he's got a third person doing something else in the background.

That makes me nervous, given we have no way to make sure. I have to wonder if we're doing enough. Should we not be finding some way to attack the Man-God directly?

When I asked Orsted about it, he simply shook his head. “According to your diary, the future he was really trying to change hasn’t yet come to pass,” he said.

Guess that means we’ve gotta keep up with our preparations until then.

As for the future the Man-God is trying to change, I suspect our next big showdown will involve Cliff. According to my future diary, I let him die. I suspect the Man-God was involved with that, though I have no way of confirming that. It doesn’t help that Orsted won’t share most of the essential details with me.

At any rate, that’s how it’s been going. I work for a month, go into the office to make my report, then spend two or three days with my family and friends. I have about five to ten days of rest—which I spend training—before the next job comes in. That’s pretty much how my life has been for a while now.

Oh yeah, speaking of work... I’ve finally carried out some of the plans I’ve made. The first of them pertains to my workspace. We’d been using the little cottage on the outskirts of Sharia where we first built my Magic Armor, but it wouldn’t meet the long-term needs of our headquarters, so I had it remodeled. It’s still a one-story house, but there’s now a nap room, a meeting room, and a reference room. This allows for overnights if needed and makes it easier for us to have strategy meetings. Of course, it makes me a little anxious leaving records of our meetings and plans there, but on the other hand, there’s way too much information for me to remember it all. Such as when so-and-so from such-and-such place will do such-and-such thing, and who, if allowed to live, will have such-and-such impact on the future.

I also made an armory not far from the cottage itself, where I store any magic items or implements, as well as my Magic Armor. (Speaking of which, we managed to make a smaller version of my

Magic Armor, but I'll spare you the details.) With the amount of stuff I've got stowed there, a thief would be set for life if they stole it all and sold it. Since I'm the only one who uses the inventory, I've sealed the door with earth magic to guard against the chance that someone might swipe it all. Orsted might not have any use for the stuff in there, but since it's still technically office supplies, I gotta make sure it's taken care of. It makes me wish I had someone to look after it all.

That said, these aren't the only changes I made; our central work office is actually in the basement of the cottage. Using earth magic, I've created a huge space almost like a labyrinth. The place is split into twenty-three rooms, each with its own teleportation circle. Each one will take you to major locations across the world...eventually, anyway. Only five of the circles have been properly activated, meaning the only places we travel to are Asura Kingdom, the Holy Country of Millis, the Great Forest, the King Dragon Realm, and the southern part of the Demon Continent.

We only have these five because we have to set up a connecting teleportation circle on the other side. And unfortunately, Orsted doesn't really visit the sort of deserted locations that would be ideal for our purposes; crowded places make it a bit difficult to set up teleportation circles. Hence the reason we don't have more than five, though we do plan to expand in the future.

All right, Paul. I'm sure my work talk only bored you to tears, and you probably don't want to hear any more of it. Let's get to what you've actually been waiting for and talk about your kids and grandkids.

We'll start off with my oldest daughter, Lucie Greyrat. Lucie is growing steadily. She just celebrated her third birthday the other day. She's gotten better at walking and totters about the house.

She's learned quite a bit of vocabulary and likes to speak in a loud voice—thanks in part, I'd bet, to Eris—so our house is quite lively.

It seems Sylphie has been teaching her the Human Tongue and magic lately. Only three and she's already receiving the kind of special education usually reserved for gifted children. I guess Sylphie will be a teacher-mom. If she puts on some triangular glasses, my little lessons with her at night might heat up, too.

Anyway. Back to Lucie. I guess I haven't spent that much time with her, so sometimes when I come home, she stares blankly at me like she has no idea who I am. It's super disheartening. Thankfully, Sylphie always says, "That's Daddy. Say hi." And she'll respond, "Welcome home, Daddy." She is so ridiculously adorable I could just eat her up. But immediately after she's greeted me, she gets this look like she doesn't know what a *daddy* is, then hides behind Sylphie.

It's heartbreaking. She'll never respect me as her father at this rate. I know this is the path I chose, but that doesn't make it any less depressing.

But while we're on the topic of Lucie, I did take her to meet Orsted once. I was curious as to whether his curse would work on her—whether what the Man-God said was true or not.

In short: his curse doesn't work on her. In fact, the moment she saw him, her eyes lit up. She stretched her tiny hands toward his silver hair and shouted, "Daddy! Daddy!" As if she legitimately thought he was her real father. I honestly considered killing Orsted at that point.

Just kidding! Sorry. I swear I didn't feel *that* murderously toward him. But, you know...it kinda annoyed me, that's all.

Maybe it's because Sylphie has white hair, so Lucie assumed Orsted must be family since his hair was a similar color. I taught her

his name, which she then promptly repeated as, “Orstay? Orstay!” How sweet. Perfectly native pronunciation, if I do say so myself.

As I watched sourly, Orsted let Lucie ride on his shoulders. She was gripping his hair tight enough that I worried she might rip it right out, so I scolded her. “It’s not good to pull people’s hair,” I said.

Amusingly—or perhaps interestingly—enough, Orsted replied, “It’s not an issue. Something this trivial won’t even begin to affect my Dragon Saint Battle Aura.” He seemed rather happy that our Lucie took such a liking to him. And how could he not be? She’s insanely cute.

Anyway, what the Man-God said seemed even more believable now. The part about my descendants working with Orsted to defeat him, I mean. When I brought that up to Orsted, he glared at me with a terrifying expression and said, “Don’t trust what the Man-God says.”

Of course I don’t trust *everything* he says, but I also sense that there’s some truth in there. Maybe that’s just wishful thinking on my part.

Lately, I’ve gotten better at reading Orsted’s moods. He’s in a super good mood when he plays around with Lucie. He apparently finds anyone who becomes attached to him endearing. On top of that, I’m sure he’s happy to encounter something new after going through the same time loops over and over. I can only imagine how he must be feeling after the number of loops he’s been through. As his subordinate, I want to help ensure he finds each day as entertaining as the last.

Whoops, guess I got off track again. Well, while we’re on the topic of children, Roxy gave birth. There was a blizzard that day. The renovations on our office weren’t yet complete then, so after I’d fulfilled my mission and returned to the cottage, I found Orsted waiting for me. This was something he did on occasion. The cottage

had only one room at that point so there was nowhere else for him to go, really, and getting new orders and reporting on previous work was kind of a combo deal. So when he finished his own work, he would often wait around at the cottage until it was time to move on to the next step.

Anyway, that day I'd intended to start my report as usual when he suddenly said, "Isn't it about time?"

Those were the first words out of his mouth. I knew what he meant; it was obvious enough. I had been anxious the entire job wondering when it would happen. I never dreamed, of course, that Orsted would bring it up. But like anyone else, I'm only human.

"You can report to me later," he told me.

I agreed and quickly left the cottage, charging through the drifts like a snowplow as I hurried home. I came home to find Roxy ready to go into labor at any time. If I'd returned home even two days later, I would have missed the birth altogether.

"Oh, Rudy... Are you sure I'll be able to do this? Will I really be able to deliver this baby?" Roxy had asked me.

Poor thing. She was at her wits' end by the time I made it back. Her face was white as a sheet as she repeated the words, "Will this be okay? Maybe I can't actually do it." She never let go of my hand. It made me wonder if Zenith—Mom, I mean—had reacted the same way when she gave birth to me. At the time, all I could think was, *Roxy sure is a worrywart.*

Unfortunately for me, Roxy's worries were not misplaced. The birth wasn't an easy one. The baby's shoulders got stuck in the birth canal. What they call shoulder dystocia, I guess. No idea what the cause was. Maybe it was because Roxy is so petite. As a Migurd woman, she was more than old enough to bear children, but having a half-human child meant it was larger than a normal Migurd baby. For her, it was probably similar to someone giving birth at a young

age. Regardless, it was highly likely that my genes were the culprit here.

Fortunately it didn't lead to any danger for the mother or baby. Lilia's hands were well-practiced by this point, and Aisha was ever the genius. They had the added help of a doctor and midwife, thanks to me rushing out and snowplowing to a clinic and back. Our party setup was not lacking for this adventure for sure. Aisha had some experience helping with Lucie's birth, so she was extremely calm throughout the affair. It went relatively smoothly with no one making any mistakes or anything else going wrong. Thus, Roxy was able to give birth without a C-section, and both she and the baby made it out alive.

The new baby was another girl, a bit bigger than Lucie had been as a baby. I wouldn't call her chunky, but she did have a brazen look on her face. Wonder who she could've gotten that from...

"Her eyes look just like Roxy's, but her mouth is more like Rudy's," Sylphie had said.

Her impertinent face was apparently a mix of ours. Well, it would be weird if it wasn't, considering she was our child.

"We agreed on Lara if it was a girl, right?"

And so, my daughter was named Lara Greyrat.

I didn't notice until a little after she was born, but she has Roxy's hair color. A beautiful blue. One that characterizes the Migurds, you might even say.

Roxy and Sylphie had complicated feelings on the matter. At first, I didn't understand what bothered them so much about it. I thought Roxy's hair was beautiful. Plus, Lara was a girl. I had no doubt she'd grow up to be adorable too.

However, Sylphie reminded me that having a unique hair color would give kids plenty of ammunition to bully her. There are plenty of non-human races living in Sharia, but the majority of the

population is still human. Naturally, the less human you look, the more likely you'd get picked on for it. Would Lara's blue hair that she'd inherited from Roxy be a curse? Would she be bullied for it? It was too soon to know, but as her father, I intended to keep an eye on it.

This is a bit of a digression, but Elinalise also gave birth around the same time as Roxy. Given her experience, she had no trouble popping her baby out. One day Cliff was telling me she should go into labor any day now; the next time I saw her, she was cradling a baby in her arms and was back to her usual slender form. Guess that's what happens when you're a child-birthing veteran. She's probably been through a hundred births by now.

At any rate, the Grimors' first child was a boy they named Clive. As I looked at him, Elinalise excitedly gushed, "I gave birth to an heir!"

An heir, huh. Personally, I don't think the heir of a family needs to be a boy. If either Lucie or Lara expressed interest in continuing my job helping Orsted, I wouldn't try to stop them. His curse didn't seem to work on them anyway.

Alas, Elinalise's words managed to provoke one person: Eris. She'd been working with me at that point. A temp employee working collaboratively with Orsted's company, I guess you could say. She'd stay by my side, take the vanguard in battle, and mow down anyone who stood in our way. However, upon hearing what Elinalise said, she began having her way with me more often, even in the middle of work, as if to say, "It's my turn next!"

We were going at it often enough that getting pregnant shouldn't have been a problem for her. In fact, given how active our sex life was, it'd be weirder if she didn't fall pregnant. Each time she'd push me to the ground and like a helpless maiden, I'd—okay, yeah, I'll spare you the gory details.

Anyway, whether through bad luck or something else, Eris wasn't having any luck getting pregnant. Naturally, that made her anxious. I noticed her consulting Sylphie night after night when we were back home. She apparently didn't want me to know how concerned she was because she kept the intricate details from me. Though, I did hear her say one thing that did terrify me.

"I wonder if we should be going at it more often..."

Eris was already draining me of all I was worth; any more and she'd shrivel me like a prune. Nonetheless, it is the husband's duty to soothe his wife's concerns, so I gave it everything I had. I started using the calendar method (or the Ogino Method as it's known in Japan, which involves keeping track of a woman's menstrual cycle), being more careful of what I ate, and keeping training to a minimum. I tried all sorts of things.

Okay, leaving aside my excuse that I was trying to allay her worries, I'd be a liar if I said I wasn't turned on by the whole thing.

I'd heard that that at one point Zenith had been concerned because she wasn't able to get pregnant, either. I wonder if you did stuff like this to try to reassure her. I do remember the two of you going at it every night like animals. That was how Norn was conceived, after all.

Speaking of which, Norn is in good spirits and still attending school. Enough about her, though. Thanks to my efforts, Eris finally managed to get pregnant. It happened approximately a month after I made her cut back on all her training. Apparently the source of her struggle was the intense training she was doing every day. Jumping, hopping, punching, kicking: you name it, she was doing it. Babies are normally pretty resilient, enough that a person can still get pregnant even if they're working out, but in Eris's case, the frequency and intensity of her exercise was twice or more than what any normal human being would do. It was quite likely that fertilization was

taking place but the embryos couldn't implant because of all her rigorous activity.

That brought an end to her temporary employment. She could no longer accompany me for work, but she seemed satisfied nonetheless, grinning proudly and snickering as she rubbed her swollen belly. As someone who'd known her since childhood, it filled me with emotion to see her like this. She had grown into such an awe-inspiring woman. Philip and Sauros—rest their souls—must be weeping for joy in their graves.

Incidentally, confirmation of her pregnancy only happened about a month prior to me penning these words to you. Right now, Eris is in the fourth month of her pregnancy. She's been pretty well-behaved lately, perhaps in part because of morning sickness. By the time I finish my next job and get back home, I guess she'll be in her fifth month.

Part of me worries that she'll return to her intense workouts once she's gotten used to pregnancy. I sent a letter to Ghislaine asking for advice since she's the only other person who has known Eris for as long as I have. I figured she might know how to convince Eris to cool it until her pregnancy is over.

Ghislaine must be having it rough, too. Namely because the king, who'd long been bedridden with illness, finally passed away. Ariel will soon be taking the throne. First Prince Grabel seems to be putting up one final struggle, but he's hardly a formidable foe at this point. There's no chance that Ariel will lose this fight. As she informed me, Ariel will probably need to spend the next two or three years fighting to secure her seat, so Ghislaine will have plenty to do as her bodyguard in the meantime.

If for any reason we head out toward Asura Kingdom after Eris gives birth, I'd like to pay all of them a visit.

While we're discussing Eris, it seems like she's only given thought to what we'll name our baby if it's a boy. For that reason, I decided to come up with a girl's name on my own. I don't care what gender the child will be; I'll be happy as long as she safely gives birth and has a healthy baby. That's all I care about—the safety of the mother and child.

Honestly, between work, training, and hanging around the house, my days are pretty fulfilling. Granted, I don't have a whole lot of time to spend with my kids, but otherwise things are good.

Finally, I'd like to talk about Zenith's mental state. There's still no sign of her regaining her memories. She was making progress with her emotions, but that progress stalled at some point. She basically can't speak whatsoever. I tried brainstorming with Orsted for solutions, but he doesn't seem to know how to help her, either. And if it's a mystery to him of all people, maybe that means there isn't a way to help her at all.

That said, he did tell me that in all the loops he's been through, this is the first time he's ever seen her become disabled like this. So perhaps there is some solution out there he simply isn't aware of—some magic item that can cure her. I'd prefer to not give up and keep looking for a cure, but I think my only choice is to prepare to be in it for the long haul.

Father, remember how you scolded me when we were in the Holy Country of Millis? You were upset that I was preoccupying myself with another woman and leaving Mother to fend for herself. I don't mean for that to be the case this time, but I hope you'll forgive me for not prioritizing her recovery more.

I'd like to continue doing the best I can.

Respectfully,



With a thud, I shut my diary. I had written it like a letter—one I would never send to anyone. There were days where writing like this hardened my resolve, and that resolve meant plenty of motivation to get me moving.

“All right, guess it’s time to go.”

Eager to greet the day, I stood up and started toward a magic circle. Thus began another day of work.

Chapter 1: One Job Among Many

HER NAME WAS Angelique Curenttale, or Angie for short. She was born at the western edge of the King Dragon Realm, in a village bordering a dense forest. Since her parents were both apothecaries, they naturally educated her in their field as they raised her. Alas, before she reached adulthood, the two of them were attacked and killed by a monster. It was a story not altogether unusual for those in her village. Saddened by the loss, she held a funeral for them with the other villagers' help, then inherited their house and followed the same career path.

Angie had one person she could call a close friend, and that was Pham Haindora, a girl born into a local hunting family. Like Angie, Pham lost her parents early; her mother died from illness before she reached adulthood, and her father was killed by a monster... Or rather, her father was actually the escort for Angie's parents when they ventured into the forest to retrieve some herbs. He sadly lost his life in the process, unable to protect his charges or himself.

All of this resulted in Pham feeling guilty for what happened with Angie, and Angie in turn resenting Pham. The two fortunately made peace with one another after a number of quarrels. Presently, the whole village knew just how close-knit the two were. This year, both girls had turned twenty-one.

"Tsk, tsk... Aren't there any decent guys out there anywhere?" Pham muttered to herself. She was wearing a well-tanned fur vest and snug, cropped leather leggings. Her boots were made of thick fur and a mountain knife hung from her hip, a quiver and bow thrown over her shoulder. She looked like a brigand *and* she was covered head-to-toe in dirt, but that didn't detract from her attractive facial features.

“Well, there sure aren’t any around here,” Angie replied. Being an apothecary, she wore pants that were easy to move in and a tanned leather top. Instead of having a sword at her hip, she had a hatchet. The most significant thing that separated her from her friend was the enormous basket she carried on her back. It was half-full of herbs and fruits.

The two were currently in the forest as Angie was collecting ingredients to make medicine.

“Rich boys are the best. Gorgeous but ignorant of the world and no experience with women. All you gotta do is hold their hand and their cheeks go bright red,” said Pham.

“I’d be fine with a normal guy. Don’t care if he’s got money, I just want him to be nice.”

“Ugh, Angie, can’t you dream bigger?”

“Maybe you should consider coming back to reality instead, Pham.”

There weren’t many eligible young men in their village. Most were already married. There weren’t many followers of Millis among them, but per village rules, only the chief was allowed to take more than one wife. The current chief was closing in on fifty, and he already had five wives. It wasn’t likely that he’d take on another one at this point.

“Reality, huh?” Pham sniffed. “The only guy round here I’d have a chance of marrying is probably Docchy.”

The man in question, Dochil, was the son of the village chief and the same age as them. Alas, he was promised to someone the moment he was born, and had already married them. He even had a son to act as his heir. There was talk that he’d soon be succeeding his father as chief. Once that happened, he’d no doubt take himself another wife, as was custom for a new chief. Naturally, the topic of

the town was who his second woman would be. Their village had far more unmarried women than it did married men.

Pham shook her head. "Nah, he'd never take me as a wife."

"Well, it's true you always used to bully him."

"In that case, maybe he'd pick me out of spite. That way he could have his way with me and pay me back during our first night together."

This time, it was Angie's turn to shake her head. "No way. He's still terrified of you even now."

Since the two girls were close in age, they often played together as kids. There were seven other children of similar age in the village, and Pham had acted as their leader when they were kids. Back then, she often picked on Dochil, bringing him to tears. Angie had been a part of their group and naturally assumed she'd wind up marrying one of the others, but it didn't work out that way. Three of that group left the village, leaving only Dochil and three girls behind. One of those girls was his betrothed, so she'd already gotten married. That only left Pham and Angie.

"But you still have a chance, Angie. You're a cutie."

"Huh? Nah, no way. I mean, I'm the only apothecary in this village. I wouldn't be able to keep working if I got married, and that'd leave everyone in a pinch."

"Guess so. Well, maybe you'll get lucky, as a reward for your hard work this time around."

"Ahaha! That would be nice, wouldn't it?" Angie laughed.

In truth, she was actually thinking about something completely different. *Marriage, huh? Guess my Prince Charming isn't coming.*

Angie had insisted that her friend come back to reality, but from a young age, she'd heard a bard's tale that had absolutely inspired her. It was a story about an adventurer with blue hair who traveled

alone from the Millis Continent to the Central Continent and shot to the Guild's A Rank in no time.

Still, although Angie's heart sang when she heard of it, she chalked it up to being a tale from a distant land and gave it little more thought than that. It wasn't until the events a decade prior that she stopped dismissing it so readily.

One day, a certain adventurer wandered into their village. The person in question had left the dense forest on their way to Westport and was making a brief stop at their village on the way, or so they said. As fate would have it, she was short and had blue hair. She also had a witch's hat, white robes, a long staff, and a square rucksack hooked over her shoulders. She was exactly as the bards had described her. What had once seemed like a fantastical tale was now reality before Angie's eyes.

The girl stayed only one night in their village, but she regaled the ten-year-old Angie and the other villagers with accounts of her journeys. It was unbelievable; the girl who sounded like nothing more than a fictional character was there in the flesh, retelling her very real adventures.

Pham and the others lit up when they heard the story about her taking down a boss in a labyrinth, but what made Angie's heart soar was the girl's reason for entering that labyrinth in the first place. She claimed she explored labyrinths hoping to find a dashing male partner. Alas, she'd conquered said labyrinth without fulfilling that intended goal, but the memories of her tale had a lasting impact on Angie. From that day onward, the adventurer's tale inspired a deep yearning in her. A yearning that, some days, dragged her into an ocean of fantasy. She imagined herself cornered suddenly by a monster, only for a dashing prince to swoop in and save her! Naturally, as a way of thanking her savior, she would offer her own body as a reward. *Eehee!* she giggled inwardly.

But as much as she gushed, she knew it wasn't realistic. Dreams were just that—dreams. Delusions didn't magically become reality. Angie was perfectly aware that such a convenient love story wouldn't happen in real life. When they spoke of marriage, she would fantasize, but those fantasies were no more than fiction inside her head. Something she yearned for. She had her eyes focused on reality for now. Not that she had any other choice; when she was orphaned five years ago, she'd been forced to face the facts whether she liked them or not.

"Angie, be careful," said Pham. "We're entering you-know-who's territory now."

"Yeah, I know."

The two had made their way close to a cave deep within the forest, and it was there that Angie paused to set her basket down. The two had come here looking for ingredients to make medicine—specifically, a special tonic to treat an illness common to this region, known as Ibri Syndrome.

"We gotta save Docchy."

"Yeah, we do."

The village leader's son, Dochil, had recently come down with the syndrome. Those beset by it experienced high fevers, developed a rash across their entire body, and would die within ten days if they didn't imbibe the necessary medicine. That said, you could combat the illness with a special tonic, and it could also be cured with Intermediate-tier detoxification magic. It couldn't be transmitted from person to person, either. That was the main reason people in the cities didn't consider it very dangerous.

The same couldn't be said for Angie and those who lived in her village. For them, it was a terrifying sickness with a high mortality rate. The closest mage capable of Intermediate-tier detoxification

magic was more than ten days away, even if they made good time on the road and pushed themselves to make it there quickly.

It was unfortunate that Dochil, their childhood friend and future leader of their village, had taken ill with it. Ibri Syndrome was partly responsible for the deaths of both girls' parents. Pham's mother had come down with it, and Pham's father and both of Angie's parents had set out to gather ingredients for the medicine in the forest. That was how they met their grisly ends. Thus, both of them had fateful ties to the disease which now threatened the life of someone else close to them. That was the force that drove them to collect the necessary ingredients for a tonic.

Silence stretched between them as they moved cautiously forward. The ingredient they needed was the Eant Flower, which grew at the base of the cliffs just ahead. Since they only needed enough tonic for one person, five or six petals should suffice.

The two gulped audibly as they came out of the trees and into a meadow which stretched before them. It was a vast field right in the middle of the forest, bursting with blue flowers—a pure field of Eant Flowers.

Again, they swallowed hard. Their expressions remained rigid despite the beautiful sight before them. Angie stretched out a trembling hand toward one of the flowers, pulling off a single petal.

“Groooooaar!” Like a crack of thunder, a deep roar ripped through the air.

“Angie, run!”

The shout didn't register; Angie's feet were already frozen with fear. Pham pulled an arrow from her quiver and nocked it while yelling, “Angie! Hurry!”

“Ah!”

An apparition appeared in the meadow, at the top of the cliffs—an enormous lizard, at least ten meters long, with plum-colored skin.

It was the ruler of the forest: the Ibri Lizard. It was a wingless reptile, similar to the enormous lizards which inhabited the Begaritt Continent.

You might wonder why it's called the Ibri Lizard. That was because Ibri Syndrome ran rampant in whatever lands these lizards inhabited, and also because the flowers necessary for the special tonic to treat it were always close to the lizard's territory. A scholar theorized that the Ibri Lizard spread the Ibri Syndrome so that humans would come to gather flowers for the cure, thereby providing the lizard with easy prey. Whether that is true has yet to be proven. Nonetheless, these past five years their village had been plagued both by the lizard and the sickness that seemed to follow it.

This culprit was the culprit who killed both of Angie's parents and Pham's father.

"Aaaah!" Pham let out a howl, trying to pump herself up as she let her arrow fly. It soared toward the Ibri Lizard, finding its mark with a dull sound as it pierced the creature's scales.

In that same instant, the lizard made its move. It scaled down the cliff wall as quickly as a gecko. It didn't seem as though Pham's arrow had affected it at all.

"Angie! I'm begging you, stand up! Run!"

Thanks to Pham's encouragement, Angie finally found her feet. *I have to run! I have to hurry!* Panic gripped her, causing her feet to trip, but despite her stumbling she somehow managed to scurry away. Pham joined her in retreat once she was sure Angie was up and moving.

Unfortunately, it was already too late.

"Groooooooooaar!"

With impressive speed, the Ibri Lizard closed in, catching up to Pham. Its gleaming, jagged teeth clamped down on her leg.

“Gaaaaah!”

The creature lifted her like she was a rag doll, and flung her through the air. Pham let out an unladylike howl as she went flying, crashing into the flowers carpeting the meadow.

Angie had seen it all. Her eyes had met Pham’s as the latter sailed through the air. She’d had a look of sheer terror on her face. Having witnessed that, Angie hesitated, thinking she had to save her friend. But before she even knew what was happening, the Ibri Lizard was right in front of her.

“Ah...”

I’m going to die, Angie realized.

In the past, she’d dreamed of someone jumping in to save her in such a situation, but those were nothing more than delusions. The reality is that when someone is in a real crisis, there’s no time for anyone to jump in and help. Death arrives in an instant. That’s simply how the world works.

That was precisely why what happened next *had* to be nothing more than a dream.

Something slammed into the Ibri Lizard from the side, sending it hurtling.

“Huh?” Angie couldn’t believe her eyes. The very thing that was about to kill her, that should have been too large and heavy to be sent spinning through the air, was flying off in an odd direction.

“Grrr...” snarled the creature. Blood spilled out of its mouth when it finally landed. It raised its head, glancing across from where it had fallen.

Angie followed its gaze to find a man standing there in a mouse-gray robe that flapped the wind. Beneath that, he wore black armor, and held what appeared to be a tube in his left hand. His light-brown hair fluttered as he strode toward the Ibri Lizard.

“Graaah!” The Ibri Lizard launched itself at him with such agility it was hard to believe it had been grievously wounded in the attack. Its enormous fangs closed around the man, sinking into him. It appeared as if the creature had bitten him in half, but that was only a hallucination on Angie’s part—he was perfectly alive and well. Somehow, the man had managed to stop the Ibri Lizard’s head with his right hand, gripping its enormous nose and holding it in place. He languidly lifted his left hand, aiming the strange tube at its head.

“Shotgun Trigger!” shouted the man.

Something discharged from the tube he was holding. Angie couldn’t make out what it was, but it shot out at an incredible speed. In the moment she blinked, the Ibri Lizard’s entire head was blown off. The impact was almost like an uppercut, jerking its long neck upward, its entire body flopping.

Despite its enormous size, the sound of it collapsing was strangely quiet. It was hard for Angie to believe what she was seeing, but bright red blood steadily flowed from the creature’s severed neck.

“Phew.” The man let out a breath and extended his right hand toward the creature’s corpse. Flames swallowed it up seconds later, the fire crackling as it devoured the natural oils from the monster’s body. The smell of burning meat filled the area.

The man then finally turned to Angie. Silhouetted by the flames, he spoke to her as casually as if he were asking the weather. “Hello there. You’re Angelique Curenttale, yes?”

“Huh?” Angie blurted out, dumbfounded.

“Or are you Pham Haindora?”

He’s asking for your name, she realized. But for whatever reason, her tongue couldn’t form the words for a response, so she just quickly shook her head and then bobbed it in quick succession.

“I came here to rescue you.”

When the man in the mouse-gray robe said that, her heart suddenly beat louder.

This stranger introduced himself as Rudeus Greyrat. While Angie battled with her thundering pulse, he made his way over to Pham and began healing her. It was almost instantaneous. She didn't regain consciousness, but her leg, which had been nearly torn off, was reattached, the bone unbroken, and the skin no longer bruised purple.

Rudeus explained that someone had asked him to come to their rescue, but he wouldn't name their secret benefactor. For her part, Angie had no clue who could have possibly put him up to this.

"Regardless, I am simply glad I made it in time," he said. "That was a close call."

"Y-yes!"

Rudeus carried the unconscious Pham on his back as he walked through the forest. Angie, meanwhile, was hauling a basket now full of Eant Flowers and incessantly smoothing her hair.

I just know my hair must be a rat's nest, and my clothes are covered in dirt. No doubt my butt is, too. I bet it's all over my face as well. Ugh, what should I do? Wait, I guess the more problematic thing here is my attitude, isn't it?

Each time Rudeus glanced over his shoulder at her, her cheeks lit up and she had to avert her eyes as she followed behind him. Fortunately, he didn't seem to pay her strange behavior any mind. He actually kept his eyes focused ahead most of the time, almost as if he thought it wrong to look upon her face. He did not break the silence as they walked. Occasionally he would glance back at her, but very infrequently and only to confirm she was still behind him. Angie wished she could get a better look at his face.

Oh no... We're about to reach the village. Once we do, he'll be a hero. He defeated the lizard, after all, and saved our village. What

should I do? If that happens, there's no way I'll be able to get a word in with him after that.

Finally, her eyes landed on Pham, who was still slumped against his back. Her full breasts were pressed flush against him, and Angie couldn't help but be a bit jealous.

"Uh, um, Mister Rudeus!" Angie blurted.

"Yes, what is it?" Rudeus glanced back at her, his expression blank.

"Ph-Pham! I m-mean, isn't Pham heavy?"

"Not at all."

"B-but," she stammered, "we've been walking all this time. You have to be exhausted, right?!"

"No. I have trained my body enough not to be worn out by something like this." As he spoke, he rolled up his sleeve, flexing his arm. It was impossible to see the muscle beneath his black armor, but Angie was nonetheless impressed. *He really does work out!*

Rudeus smacked his fist against his open palm as he said, "Ah, I get it. My apologies for not realizing sooner."

"Sorry?"

Realize what? Angie wondered. She stared blankly at him, and he smiled at her, his pearly teeth glimmering.

"Miss Angelique, you must be tired. Shall we take a small break?"

Incidentally, his teeth glimmering was a mere hallucination on Angie's part.

After a long pause, she finally stuttered, "Oh, r-right, yes! I'm exhausted. Sorry, but please let me rest a bit. Also, feel free to call me—ahem, I mean, please, call me Angie, if you don't mind!"

"All right, Miss Angie. In that case, how about right here?"

Rudeus slowly lowered Pham to the ground, propping her against a tree while he settled down on a nearby stump. There were two such stumps, both V-shaped, and Rudeus had positioned himself perfectly out of consideration for her, making sure there was a short distance that separated them. Angie, however, realized this was her chance.

Here goes! Angie purposefully plopped down right beside him.

Rudeus visibly flinched, his shoulders jumping.

Did I...upset him? Angie snuck a glance at his face. He looked uncomfortable, but at least he didn't look obviously disgusted. It was more like he was confused. Angie quickly came up with an excuse.

"S-sorry, I was just so scared, you see. I-I still am, so do you mind if I sit next to you?"

"Huh? Uh, sure. Be my guest..."

Things were proceeding smoothly between them, and Angie intended to ride that wave however far it would take her.

"Erm, uh, thank you so much for what you did," she squeaked.

"Not at all. It's part of my job," Rudeus responded curtly, looking down at her. For some reason, his eyes kept darting back and forth. Angie followed his gaze, not thinking much of it until she noticed her clothes which had at some point caught on something and ripped, leaving her chest exposed.

Angie gasped and immediately tried to hide herself, hands across her breasts. Honestly, she intended to see this dream through to its steamy conclusion, however far off it might be, which was precisely why she sidled closer to Rudeus. He promptly pulled away, putting more distance between them. Angie closed the gap again, only for him to retreat. She pursued him until he was backed onto the edge of the stump, and she pressed herself against his arm.

"Um, Mister Rudeus?"

“Y-yes, what is it?”

Rudeus’s gaze kept wandering to her breasts, prompting her to swallow hard. She wasn’t as well-endowed as Pham, but she was larger than most girls in the village. Pervy old men often harassed her with sexual comments such as, “Didja boil this medicine in the valley between those nice big mounds ya got?” In the village, they were objects that people teased her about, but right now something inside her screamed that it was time to employ them as a weapon.

“Perhaps, it really is just a job for you, as you say, but that doesn’t change how grateful I am that you saved my life,” said Angie.

“W-well, you’re welcome.”

“If—I mean, that is, assuming you don’t intend to return home right away once we get back to the village, then...please, stop by my house. I’d love to find a way to repay you.”

“No, I must return home promptly. I have another job lined up.”

That took the wind right out of her sails, but not enough to persuade her to give up. After all, Angie was in this for the long haul. She wanted to continue this adventure to its natural conclusion, until her long journey brought her to the eternal city of happily-ever-afters.

“Then, well, in that case, please...let me show you my appreciation now. I don’t have anything to offer, so I’m afraid...all I can give is m-my body...” Angie’s face burned bright red as her hands traveled up her torn shirt, ready to pull it all the way open. Rudeus’s gaze was firmly glued to her chest as she started to expose herself, but then he abruptly stood up.

“Um...Mister Rudeus?”

“My apologies, but I have a chronic disease that’s threatening to flare up, so I need to take some medicine.” Even as he spoke, he didn’t peel his eyes away from her chest.

Nonetheless, hearing the mention of medicine brought Angie back to her senses. She was an apothecary, after all. Hearing that the man before her suffered from a chronic illness reflexively made her want to help.

“Uh, um! If it’s medicine you need, I’m an apothecary. As soon as we return to my house, I can brew you something,” she offered.

“No, I brought my own with me,” Rudeus replied, slipping a hand into his pocket. He produced a small bundle of white cloth. Angie watched, spurred on more by curiosity of what this medicine could be than romantic interest. This was likely in part to being too obsessed with her work.

Rudeus was an incredibly strong warrior. He had armor and sported enough muscle to stop an Ibri Lizard in its tracks, on top of being able to use offensive magic. He was clearly a high-ranking mage warrior. Additionally, he’d used some pretty high-level healing magic on Pham as well. Angie had heard that most people learned healing magic and detoxification magic together, which meant he was presumably proficient in the latter as well. Naturally, she had to wonder what chronic illness could possibly plague a living legend like him and what medicine he used to combat it. If it was something new to her, she wanted to get a good look at it.

“Is it a tonic?” Angie asked.

“Yes, well, something like that.” Rudeus spread out the folded fabric. Angie held out her hand, to catch the medicine, but to her surprise, there was nothing. Not a pill, not a packet of powder. The fabric had been holding nothing, literally. So where was this supposed medicine?

Angie didn’t have long to wonder because as she looked up, she was puzzled at what she saw—girl’s underwear.

Rudeus was suddenly holding panties in his hands—ones that looked like they clearly belonged to an underage girl, judging by the size.



What...when did...where... Why is he holding those?

It was strange. Moments ago he'd been holding a bundle of cloth containing his medicine...no. This *was* the cloth he'd been holding. The underwear had simply been folded up. *Huh? But why?*

Utterly perplexed, she could only stare. "...Wha?"

"Pheew..." Rudeus let out a big exhale, ignoring her confusion. And then he buried his face in those panties, inhaling deeply. "Haah, haah... *Sniff, sniff...* Haah, haah." In and out, in and out he breathed. He smothered his face in the fabric, nostrils flaring as he drew in the scent. He even licked it periodically, thoroughly enjoying the soft bundle in his hands.

Angie trembled, shaken by what she was witnessing. A chill ran down her spine, but she could neither speak nor even move. She sat there frozen in place, just watching him.

"Phew," he exhaled at last, having spent a whole five minutes doing this. "Thank you, God." As he finished speaking, he placed his hands together in prayer before neatly folding the underwear and stowing them back in his pocket.

Unsure what to even say, Angie sat there, opening and closing her mouth like a fish out of water. Her mind struggled to process what was going on. The mood between them had been perfect, but then out of nowhere he whipped out those panties and started sniffing them like some kind of pervert. She didn't understand it.

"Underwear is best after it's been worn, yes indeed," he muttered to himself.

The one thing she certainly did know was that his actions had killed whatever emotions had come over her moments ago, and with it, the budding romance she'd felt.

"Well then, Miss Angie, what was it you were saying?" Rudeus asked.

After a long, long pause, she finally said, “No, it was nothing.”
Her dream had ended.

Angie promptly returned home after that.

When they arrived at the village, Rudeus entrusted Pham to her and said, “I have no intention of staying in your village at all, so I’ll excuse myself here.”

“Yes. All right. Thank you... Yeah.” Angie jerkily bobbed her head up and down, her face devoid of emotion. Alas, the irregular events of a few moments prior were still burned vividly into her mind.

“Well then, take care.” Rudeus spun on his heel and started to leave, only to pause as if he’d just remembered something. He glanced over his shoulder at her. “Oh, that reminds me. Miss Angie, you said you would return the favor, yes?”

Another chill ran down her spine. *A favor?* Yes. Now that she thought about it, he *had* saved her life. If he wanted her body, she couldn’t very well refuse him. It didn’t matter how instinctively disgusted she felt by him, she wasn’t such an ingrate that she would say no.

“Erm, uh... Well, I’m afraid I really can’t give you my underwear...”

“No, I don’t need your underwear. There’s something I want you to do for me.”

“S-something you want me to do?”

Oh crap. She just knew he would ask her to do something totally debauched. The color drained from her face as she mentally prepared herself for it.

Rudeus saw her reaction and scratched the back of his head. “Guess it’s only natural she’d be disgusted,” he muttered as he slipped something out of his backpack. He held out a picture book

and a figurine. “Miss Angie, if you happen to have a child someday, I’d like you to read this picture book to them. Tell them that the Superd Tribe aren’t a bunch of devils.”

“Huh? Supe-what? What are you talking about?”

“The Superd Tribe.”

“The Superd Tribe...” Angie echoed his words, completely thrown by this request out of the left field. Her eyes were wide as saucers.

“There is a glossary at the end of the book to help with learning how to read the letters, so you can use that as part of your child’s education, too. I do hope you’ll share this with them.”

He then departed, leaving Angie stood there dumbfounded, a picture book and a figure with green hair in her hands. Just looking at the likeness of the Superd Tribe was terrifying. The figure itself was eerily intricate and the colors painted on it made it look so realistic she wondered if it might suddenly spring to life. This little statuette was a perfect replica of a terrifying demon. She felt the urge to dispose of it immediately, but she remembered that Rudeus had saved her life, and stopped herself.

“Um...”

The Superd Tribe, huh? She had never met one of them before, but she had heard of them. They were a group of people often referred to as devils. When she was younger, her parents would often warn her that if she did anything bad, the Superds would come to carry her off and devour her. And yet Rudeus was trying to spread the story that they weren’t awful people after all.

Why would he do such a thing?

Unable to decipher his motivations, Angie wasn’t quite sure what to do. She pressed her finger against the figure’s head.

“Ah!” She gasped as the hair came off. Now all that was left behind was what looked like a bald warrior wielding a spear, cradled safely in her hand. “Pfft.” Angie burst into laughter. She still had no idea what to make of this, but her savior had made a request of her that she planned to honor.

Several years after that, Dochil—whom Angie had cured with her tonic—proposed to her and she became the second wife of their new village leader. He was a hard worker, but a rather boring man. The only upside was that he wasn’t a pervert. Angie was grateful for that at least. When her child was born, she did as she was told and read the picture book to them as she raised them.

Eventually, that picture book’s story would become widespread throughout the village. The nearby region would come to recognize the Superd Tribe as a clan of bald warriors of justice. That, however, is a story for another time.

Chapter 2: The Borrowed Cat

AND WITH THAT, I managed to bring another job to a smooth conclusion.

My objective was to save the hunter Pham Haindora from what would otherwise have been her death in that deep forest. It sounded like a simple enough task when I first heard the brief: use detoxification magic to save the village chief's son and kill the evil dragon thing (or lizard, I guess) residing deep in the forest. What could be easier?

Sadly, when I arrived, Pham had already set out for the forest. I panicked and chased after the girl as quickly as I could, but Pham was already at death's door by the time I arrived. It was a close call. I was sweating bullets the whole time she was unconscious, and I muttered several healing incantations under my breath as I was carrying her.

Pham wasn't alone out there, either. She had her apothecary friend Angie with her, and this Angie person was more dangerous than I'd imagined. She was far too sexy. Bewitching, even. If I hadn't watched myself properly, I might have given in right there and had my way with her. Fortunately, I avoided death by temptation only thanks to the replica of my holy idol. Ordinarily, such divine rituals should never be performed in sight of others, but I had no other choice. I had to get a grip on myself and convince the woman to abandon her advances.

"Phew."

Now all that was out of the way, it was time to hurry home, pat my kids on the head, enjoy Aisha's excellent rice dinner, then indulge in some carnal pleasures with one of my wives. That was basically my

whole reason for living. You could say it was my only motivation for getting through each mission alive.

I arrived home, still preoccupied with such thoughts. As I approached the front entrance, Byt, who was twisted around the entryway like a morning glory, swung the door open for me. *When did he become our automatic doorman?* Not that it mattered, since it was convenient.

I saw that Dillo, our armadillo, wasn't in his doghouse, which meant Roxy was still at work. Zenith was spacing out in the garden while Lilia hung the laundry, so I waved to them. Lilia bowed her head in greeting, and I slipped into the house.

"I'm home!"

"Oh, that's Big Brother's voice! Welcome home, welcome home! Sadly, your baby sister is a little preoccupied right now, but I am saying 'welcome home'!" Aisha's voice bellowed from the basement.

"Yep, I can hear you!" *Wonder what she's doing? Maybe sorting out the fertilizer?*

"Welcome home, Rudy," Sylphie said, hurrying out from the living room. Lucie followed close behind, like a little duckling.

"Glad to be home, Sylphie. I'm exhausted."

"Make sure to rest after this then." Sylphie helpfully peeled off my robe, dusting it off before hanging it up. I had already taken off the magic armor I had been wearing beneath it and left it at the office.

I stood by the large mirror near the entrance and what stared back was an ordinary man you could find just about anywhere in the world. Except today in particular I looked utterly fatigued, like a perpetually exhausted salaryman.

"Daddy! Wall-come home!"

While I was busy studying my reflection, Lucie came up and greeted me. She had light brown hair and stoic yet dignified features. She was only three, but looked like a beautiful little elf boy. Her ears were admittedly shorter than Sylphie's, but otherwise she looked exactly like her mother at that age. And here she was, standing quietly in front of me, welcoming me home.

Aaah! Did you hear that?! "Daddy! Welcome home!" Aaaah!

"That's right! I'm home, Lucie!" Filled with emotion, I reached down to pick her up, but Lucie promptly retreated behind Sylphie and hid from my view. She glanced at me warily once she was safely out of my reach.

The shock hit me like a fist to the gut. *Oh no. Now what? I think I might actually cry.*

"Hey, Lucie!" Sylphie scolded.

"Nooo!"

Sylphie grabbed her daughter and held her toward me. I wasted no time taking her. She was so light and warm. The same could be said about Sylphie; both she and Lucie had much higher body temperature than I. Perhaps it was because of their low body fat? Or was it a special characteristic of their race? Well, whatever the case...

Lucie-Luce! Haah haah... Lots of kisses and cheek rubs, oh yes, missy! Mwahaha!

"Nooo! Pricklies!" Lucie voiced her complaints as I rained down kisses upon her.

Come to think of it, I hadn't shaved at all while on the job. Whiskers or not though, if she didn't like it, it was best to stop. It wasn't right to do something against her consent. I didn't want her to hate me. I put her down, and she scrambled toward the dining room to escape me.

Does she really hate me that much? My shoulders slumped in dejection.

“Oh, honestly, Lucie,” Sylphie grumbled, hands on her hips as she sighed.

At least Lucie was a lot fonder of me now than she used to be. She did call me “Daddy” and no longer looked at me as if she had no idea who I was. There was still some distance between us, sure, but...that couldn’t really be helped.

“Ah!”

In order to replace the warmth I had just lost, I wrapped my arms around Sylphie. I made sure to get a nice survey of her butt as I planted a kiss on her.

“Really, Rudy...”

Oh boy, now I’m starting to get all hot and bothered. Maybe I should carry her off to the bedroom? But the kids are still awake right now...

“Absolutely not. Save it for later,” Sylphie said.

“Yes, ma’am.” I obediently released her. In truth, as long as I had her love, I wouldn’t be swayed by any other woman.

“Where are Roxy and Lara?” I asked.

“Roxy’s still at the school. Lara’s in the living room.”

With that information in hand, I accompanied Sylphie to said living room. My second daughter, Lara Greyrat, was fast asleep in her cradle. She had beautiful blue hair and still had a brazen look on her face, like she was surveying the surroundings of her bed with utmost conviction. It didn’t help that Leo was curled up at the base of her bed, making her look even more self-important.

“Lara, I’m home.”

“Aauuh,” she babbled back. She was capable of responding even at this tender age. She was not yet a year old. *Could it be that my daughter is a genius?* Or perhaps, like me, she’d reincarnated here

from another world. That said, she didn't respond at all to my attempts at using English or Japanese with her.

Perhaps it was the cheeky expression she wore, but I felt like I could hear her say, "That was splendid work out there. I bid you take some time for yourself and rest now." It made me wonder she'd really grow up to sound as impertinent as she looked.

"Lara sure doesn't cry much. And she doesn't smile, either. It kind of worries me," Sylphie mumbled. Apparently she was concerned for a very different reason than I was.

I didn't see the big issue, personally. *I mean look at her, she looks super conceited.* You could tell by her face that she was gonna be a hotshot someday. No doubt about it.

Still, I could understand what Sylphie was getting at. There were so many different ailments out there in the world, and being even a little different was more than enough ammunition for other kids to bully you.

"Well, even assuming there is something wrong, as family, we'll be there to back her up," I said.

Sylphie nodded. "I agree with you, but I fear Roxy will feel responsible for anything that happens."

"Well, if that happens, I'll just have to wrap my arms around her and shower her with love."

But Sylphie did have a point. Roxy was the type to feel personally responsible. I was just happy to raise a child together with her, but she had a habit of being a bit of a perfectionist.

"Hm?"

I suddenly realized one member of our family was conspicuously absent. Namely, our resident nuclear warhead who normally greeted me with such impressive speed, she would rival Aisha. She also typically offered to let me touch her belly, as if to show off how

much it had grown, and I would take that opportunity to feel up her breasts, earning me a swift punch. That was how things usually went, but she was strangely absent today. What could be the matter?

“Where is Eris?”

“Oh.” Sylphie drew her brows together, troubled. “She’s been having a bit of a squabble with Aisha since this morning.”

“Huh? You mean the two of them are fighting?”

“I wouldn’t go as far as to say that...but, hm...” Sylphie was being far too vague. In cases like this, it was better to see for myself.

“All right,” I said. “I’ll go check in with her then.”

“Yeah.”

I patted Lara on the head and left the living room. I noticed Lucie peeking at me through a crack in the door, but the moment our eyes met, she retreated and tottered up the stairs. Part of me wanted to chase after her, but I forced my legs to take me to the basement instead.

No sooner did I make it down the stairs than I heard Aisha banging her fist against the basement door.

“Miss Eris! We already have Leo, Dillo, and Byt!”

“Yeah, I know that!” Eris barked back through the door.

“What’s going on?”

Aisha whipped around to face me. “Oh, Big Brother. You have to hear this! Miss Eris seems to have brought home a cat and it’s been a nuisance meowing all morning.”

“A cat?”

A cat, hm? Not surprising, since Eris did like animals. I didn’t care much for them since they never seemed to take a liking to me. Leo was a different story though, so I guess if anything you could call

me a dog-lover. Anyone on the receiving end of such affection can't help but want to return it.

"It's not like I hate cats, you see, but we already have three other pets, right? I told her to at least get your permission first before she decides to keep it, but she won't listen to me," Aisha explained.

So she felt like my permission was necessary, huh? *Well, I guess I am the head of the household.*

"I don't see a problem with her keeping it," I said.

"Really?!" A happy albeit muffled voice called out from behind the door.

It's not healthy to indulge every desire, but since Eris was pregnant she was probably dealing with a bunch of stress. Letting her keep a cat or two was a small price to pay if it would help relieve some of that.

"But," I said, "we do have children in the house, and I can't come home all that often. You'll have to be the one to train it."

"I know! I can do that!" Eris eagerly agreed.

Aisha grew sullen. "Hmph. In the end, I'll be the one going to buy its food, though."

Right. Come to think of it, this would probably increase Aisha's responsibilities. There was also a good chance Eris would tire of looking after it at some point.

"Sorry, Aisha."

"It's fine. This was your decision."

"I really am sorry. I'll find some way to make it up to you," I promised.

"Well, I guess..."

Her mood improved a bit after I ruffled her hair, although she didn't look terribly pleased about me messing up the style.

"Anyway, Eris, open the door," I commanded.

"Okay."

Slowly, the door cracked open. Eris appeared on the threshold, frowning. She looked formidable, even while pregnant, like the king of pregnant women, or something. Silence fell as I glanced behind her. I gulped when I spotted the cat, collar around its neck, resting inside the room. There was no debating its feline nature: covered in dirt as it was, its ears pricked with the sound of the door opening, and it flicked its tail handsomely.

Unfortunately, that wasn't the only thing I noticed. The first thing that captured my attention were its breasts. Huge honkers about the size of Eris's. Although the clothes it wore were in tatters, they at least covered its breasts and groin. Those thick, muscular thighs were coated not in fur but sun-kissed flesh, smooth as the skin of a pear.

"Ah! Boss, it's been furr-ever! You really saved my tail. I purromise I won't furget this debt fur the rest of my life!"

"I found her during my morning walk and brought her home," Eris explained. "Her name is Linia!"

Linia Dedoldia. Previously an upperclassman, this beastwoman had graduated from the University of Magic several years ago with top grades. Oh yes, I *definitely* remembered her. Mmhmm. *Well, this settles it.*

"Throw her out," I said.

"No way!" Eris slammed the door in my face.

It took nearly an hour to coax Eris to open up again. We moved to the living room to discuss the situation. It turned out that Eris had discovered Linia in the course of her routine walk with Leo. Five months pregnant, her morning sickness had finally faded, so she'd resumed going out with Leo again.

So her first return to exercise was a walk, huh? I suspected it had to do with a strong sense of territory. Whatever the case, a moderate degree of exercise was good for a pregnancy.

At any rate, it was during this walk that she passed by the slave market and an incident occurred. Linia burst out of the shadows, with some shady-looking men in pursuit. Tragically, they grabbed her by the tail and captured her. Eris, having witnessed all of this, made a split-second decision. She whipped out her sword, cut the sorry bastards down, stole off with her prize (Linia), and made her triumphant return home.

"I saved her, so she's mine! We're keeping her!" Eris insisted, sounding more like a brigand than a lady.

"R-right. I'm Lady Eris's kitty now, mew," Linia said from Eris's lap, where the latter was playing with her ears. Her entire body trembled in fear the whole time. Among beasts, the unspoken rule was to roll over for whoever was strongest.

Well, that's all fine and good, but...

"I want to know what you're even doing in the city, Linia. And why are you in those rags?" I recalled that she left school dressed in fine attire, setting off from the city claiming she was going to become a merchant. Now, she wore threadbare rags covered in grime. And, if we were being frank, she stunk.

"So glad you asked, mew. Thinking back, it was such a long, grueling and tragic tale, sure to bring tears—"

"Give me the short version," I said, interrupting.

"Mew..."

According to Linia, after graduating and leaving Sharia, she tried to accomplish exactly what she claimed she would do—become a merchant. She gathered some goods in Asura Kingdom and brought them to the Northern Territories to sell. Then, she would bring things back from the Northern Territories to sell in Asura Kingdom. In short, she was acting as a traveling merchant.

To accomplish all this, she bought herself a horse-drawn wagon, which put her into debt. She went further into debt getting funds to buy merchandise in the first place. Personally, I thought it made more sense to travel between neighboring villages at first to get a feel for the job, but Linia was trying to make bank quickly. That ended in her debt exploding due to interest rates—to no one's great surprise, I'm sure.

She spent her days dirt-poor, and although she supposedly tried to pay off her loans bit by bit, she could only pay in such trivial installments that she didn't know when she would ever manage to return it all.

Her life continued like that for a while, until one day, she found some light at the end of the tunnel. One of the merchants associated with the company she was indebted to brought her an offer.

"I notice you've been desperately trying to repay what you owe us, but from the looks of things, your sales aren't going very well. It's painful to see. I can't completely clear all your debts, but if you become a member of the company, the interest rate will drop a little, and it'll be much easier for you repay it at least. It costs twenty gold coins to become a member, but don't worry, I'll pay that sum for you. You can return the money to me later. I will need you to write me a promissory note just to be safe, but I trust you!"

Linia agreed to the deal. I thought the whole thing sounded suspicious, but I guess flattery will get you everywhere, even into a kitty's trust. Linia purchased one of the company's member badges

for twenty gold coins. Alas, that badge was a fake. When she showed it to the company, they looked at her like she was crazy. That was when she realized the man had scammed her.

While the badge was fake, the promissory note she wrote was the real thing. Instead of reducing what she owed, she was instead a further twenty gold coins in debt. And Asura gold coins were the most valuable currency in the entire world. A loan of twenty coins meant exorbitant interest. Linia was already in hot water because of all the interest from her other loans, so there was no way she could pay this one off, either. They confiscated her wagon and goods before apprehending her as well.

“They totally took me for a ride then made me into a slave to boot, mew.”

You’d think it would be more profitable to have someone paying the interest forever, so I had to assume this person had devised some way to make good money off turning her into a slave.

Well, we’ll leave that aside for now.

Honestly, it was partly her own fault that she became a slave. Of course, a scam was a scam, meaning the person responsible was awful for what they’d done, but half the responsibility for her situation was still her own.

“Hm.”

Nevertheless, I wished Eris hadn’t cut down one of the slave traders’ crew. We had two underage girls in our house, and babies too. We couldn’t have a bunch of lowlifes on our tail.

“Now what do we do...” I murmured.

“Boss, ya gotta save mew. I’ll do anything, mew. I don’t wanna be a slave, mew!” Linia put her hands together and pleaded her case. Seeing her dressed in those threadbare clothes with a collar around her neck was kind of...erotic.

“Linia, you...”

“Mew?”

“Did they have their way with you?”

“Mew!”

Before she could hop to her feet, I was already on my back, staring up at the ceiling. A violent Boreas punch had knocked me, and the chair I was sitting on, to the floor.

“Rudeus! How dare you ask something like that!” Eris barked.

“She has a point, Rudy,” Sylphie agreed. “That was a really insensitive thing to say.”

Aisha glared at me. “Big Brother, you’re a big creep.”

After that thorough bashing from the women present, I quickly said, “I’m terribly sorry.” Better to apologize earnestly. Yep. That was the best call. They were right; that was crass of me.

“That sure was rude, mew! I’ll have you know, I’m an untouched virgin, mew! Dunno why, but they said I’d be more valuable that way, so they didn’t bother, mew!”

“Oh yeah? That’s a relief.”

Why did I even ask that question to begin with? It just occurred to me and I wanted to check. I didn’t consider the question would only make her relive the trauma if she had been assaulted. I needed to be more considerate.

Anyway, they said she’d be more valuable like this, huh? Guess even this world treasures virginity. I mean, there’s even a unicorn in the Great Forest that’s totally obsessed with girls’ “purity.” I got to my feet. My nose ached from being punched, and when I pressed my fingers to my nostril, they came away coated in blood. Sylphie hurriedly used some of her healing magic on me.

“Well, anyhow, this is troubling,” I said again.

Eris had already killed some of the slave traders' people. They probably already knew what she looked like and might return for revenge. We had to do something to stop that. *Should we return Linia and try to smooth things over? Or should we make an enemy out of these slave traders and destroy them completely?* If we chose that path and they somehow kidnapped Norn, I'd be incredibly unhappy.

Though I wouldn't be able to sleep soundly at night if I abandoned Linia, either. She was a friend, after all. Hmm.

"Excuse us!" called a voice from the front entrance, interrupting my thoughts. I didn't recognize it, but Linia flinched the moment she heard it and leaped up, scrambling to hide behind the couch.

"I-It's them!"

It was the slave traders, apparently. I made my way to the front door.

"You have our slave in there, don't you? We already know she's here."

"I'm afraid I don't know what you're referring to," Lilia said. She stepped in to deal with them before I got there. "Please leave."

Three people were at the door. The one in front was short and stout, perhaps a dwarf. Behind him were two musclemen, one bald and the other sporting a mohawk. An air of violence roiled off the two like a suffocating cologne. They looked like Adon and Samson from Cho Aniki.

"Don't be like that. There's no other house in town with a gigantic white dog and a red-haired pregnant woman who can slice a man in two."

"Lady Eris does tend to resort to wanton violence, so perhaps what you are saying in that regard is true. However, we have no slaves in the house. As I said, please leave."

The bald man clicked his tongue in annoyance at Lilia's fearless rebuttal. He shoved the leader aside and stepped forward, reaching for Lilia. "Listen here, you old bag, if you keep having that attitude with us—"

Lilia flinched as his hand came violently down upon...

"Whoa! Hold up, hold up!"

...nothing, because the shorter man latched onto his arm and stopped him. "Don't put your hands on her. Don't you dare! That's the one thing I can't permit!"

"Boss, what's the problem? We always do this kinda—"

"Are you an imbecile?! That maid right there is *the* Rudeus Greyrat's wet nurse and the mother of one of his sisters! If you leave a mark on her, your entire family will be annihilated for it, I warn you!"

The bald man's face twitched in fear as he glanced at Lilia. "Then why'dja have us come along then?"

"Obviously because if things go awry and the Berserker Sword King suddenly appears, I expect you to be my shield..."

"That's cruel of ya."

At that point the short man finally took note of me, his entire face relaxing into a smile as he rubbed his hands together. "Ah, what an unexpected surprise, Mister Rudeus." His voice was grating and unpleasant. No doubt he was taking that smarmy pose to drive home the point that they hadn't actually put their hands on Lilia. As he surmised, I would have been furious if I'd seen them get violent with her. Would that be enough for me to murder their kin? No, but I couldn't necessarily say the same for Eris.

"Miss Lilia, I will take it from here," I said.

"Very well, my lord." Lilia bowed and took a step back. It looked like she planned to linger.

“Yes, well, such an honor to make your acquaintance, Mister Rudeus,” said the man, still rubbing his hands together. He dipped his head in my direction. “My name is Kincho, you see, and I deal with any friction that happens at the Valvalid shop associated with the Rium Group.”

“An honor indeed. As you already know, I’m Rudeus Greyrat.”

Kincho, huh? Sounded like Kinchol, which was coincidentally an insecticide in Japan perfect for killing mosquitoes.

“Well, Mister Kincho, to what do I owe the pleasure?” I could already guess what he was here for, but I decided to ask anyway. It would be pretty ridiculous if he told me he was here for anything other than Linia.

“Yes, well, you see, Mister Rudeus... One of our slaves recently ran away.”

“Oh? What kind of slave?” I asked.

“A Dedoldian girl. One with great combat skills and some mastery over magic as well. A top-quality slave.”

Oho! Did you hear that, Linia? He called you top-quality. He thinks pretty highly of you!

“And see, some employees of ours gave chase, only to meet a grim end. They were all cleanly cut in half.”

“Interesting.”

Definitely Eris’s work. I did feel a bit guilty about that. Those slave traders were just doing their job. It would have been one thing if they were killed by their own slave, but instead they were murdered by someone completely unrelated to the situation. That did kind of suck.

“Well, no need to dwell on that,” the little man continued. “All a part of the job. People lose their lives every day to violence in this line of work. I can hardly hold that against you. Especially given

you're the underling of the Dragon God, the second strongest of the Seven Great Powers, and a close acquaintance of Asura Kingdom's next king."

"I appreciate you being so understanding."

So he was terrified of both Orsted and Ariel. *Connections really do mean everything no matter what world you're in. Thank you, CEO Orsted and Section Chief Ariel!* With their influence in play, these negotiations were looking pretty promising. That said, I wasn't very public about my working relationship with Orsted. I guess those rumors had spread from somewhere.

"But, you see...Mister Rudeus..."

"Yes?"

"This, uh, slave of ours is just a *wee bit* valuable, you see."

I nodded. "Yes, you did say this slave is of 'top quality,' as I recall."

Personally, no matter how strong she was, Linia was still a hopeless idiot, so I didn't see her being of much real use. Not that I had any right to judge others by their intelligence, or lack thereof.

"If this was just your average slave, we'd be happy to offer her to you, no strings attached, and invite you to visit our establishment again in the future. Hehe, but sadly, we can't part with this one so easily. She's already got a buyer, see."

"And would that buyer happen to be a certain Mr. B.G.?" I guessed.

"Yes! Yes, precisely. Mister Rudeus, I am impressed how readily you guessed it correctly."

In other words, Linia was supposed to go to Eris's family.

"She's a princess of the Dedoldia tribe, can fight and use magic, and she's a beautiful, if impertinent, virgin. When I told the buyer

that, they immediately offered three hundred Asuran gold coins as a down payment.”

I wasn’t sure if it was James or one of his sons who was responsible for this, but either way, the Greyrat family had a serious obsession with beastfolk. Honestly, if they had the extra coin to waste on buying slaves, they should be using it to fund the rebuilding efforts in the Fittoa Region.

Then again, Eris had fallen for Linia at first sight, too. So maybe it was in her family’s nature to open their wallets whenever they saw limited merchandise that they’d never have a chance to own again if they passed up the first opportunity.

“A slave worth this much is rare indeed. We can’t quietly let her go without lifting a finger.”

“I can see your point,” I said.

“Yes, yes, I hope you can understand. Even if we wanted to back down, we simply can’t. Getting our hands on her cost us a pretty penny in the first place.”

I stared silently at him. *Hm, acquiring her cost them too, huh? Well, it’s true if they lose too much because of this, they’ll have to shut down.* Not that it affected me at all if they went under, but I wasn’t eager to make them resent me for it, either.

“Come to think of it, Mister Rudeus...” As I was lost in thought, Kincho flashed a huge smile at me. “As I remember, you have a younger sister and a wife going to the University of Magic here, yes? It would be a shame if things got uncomfortable for them...”

“Hold on,” I interrupted. “Are you threatening to do something to Norn and Roxy?” *If you put your hands on them, I won’t show any mercy. I’ll destroy all of Ranoa Kingdom if that’s what it takes to hunt you down.*

“Uh, erm, forget what I said! Forget I said anything! Of course, you realize, Mister Rudeus, I have no desire to make an enemy out of

you. I'm all about love and peace! I want us to be on good terms, I promise!"

"Yes, I would like the same, which is precisely why I am standing here talking to you."

"Right, of course. Which is why I'd appreciate it if you would return that slave. We have no intention of putting our lives at risk by messing with you. But, well, you understand my dilemma, don't you? If we can't get her back, it'll be our heads on the chopping block. If we are doomed to die either way, we might as well try fighting, yes?"

I understood what he was getting at, and I was just as flummoxed as he was. Any goodwill his company had would be lost if they canceled an order after getting three hundred Asuran gold coins as an advance payment. And based on the size of the deposit, they might have forked a considerable sum over to secure her for sale. If they lost her, that money was sure to bankrupt them. Faced with their business crumbling, they'd probably resort to anything to save it, no matter how grim their chances. There was nothing more frightening than a cornered animal.

"Hm..."

Well, not much I can do I guess. It was Linia's own stupid mistakes that had landed her in this mess. She'd borrowed more than she could pay back, let her loans bloat with interest, and then fallen for a ridiculously obvious scam. She'd made her own bed. Probably best for her to go to the Boreas household and consider it like a prison sentence. At least none of the beast maids I saw during Sauros's time seemed to be suffering. There'd be no backbreaking labor, either. Sure, she'd probably be subjected to some sexual stuff, but at least the masters of the house were handsome, like Philip and Eris. They would probably even pamper her, given their penchant for beastfolk. If I requested that they treat her well, that would probably work.

Yep, sounds good. Let's go with that.

"Very well, I understand," I said.

"Do you truly?"

"Yes. I'll immediately..." *...go get Linia for you*, was what I had wanted to say, but I swallowed the words the moment I turned around. My eyes met someone else's at the top of the stairs. Lucie, my beloved daughter, was peeking through the railing above, worriedly watching us from the shadows.

After a very, very long pause, I finally breathed out, "Miss Lilia?"

"Yes, what may I do for you, my lord?"

Was it right to bend to their intimidation, bow my head and obediently hand Linia over? My little girl was watching, the anxiety plain on her face. As her father, could I really hand over the terrified, trembling kitty that had turned to us for protection?

No. Obviously not.

"Go into my room and fetch all the money from my safe," I said.

"As you command."

Lilia was quick. With hurried footsteps, she disappeared deep into the house, returning moments later with an enormous bag. I felt bad for making her lug something so heavy.

I pulled the bag open. Its contents had been separated into numerous tiny bags stuffed full. I picked one up and tossed it to Kincho.

"What's this?" He eyed it warily, peeking inside. "Ah!" His face paled.

"Magic Stones," I explained. "If you take that bag to the proper place, you can fetch five hundred Asuran gold coins for its contents."

"Huh? Wha?"

“And here, have another.” I threw a second one over to him, which he scrambled to catch. “I suspect the Dedoldia girl isn’t the only one you have. Have you got an Adoldian princess with you as well? Those two are always together, after all.”

“Huh? Oh, n-no, we only have one such slave,” he assured me.

“Lying isn’t going to do you any favors.” I tossed him another bag, which he caught, but the confusion on his face only grew more pronounced. “Just to let you know, if I have to burn your entire shop to the ground to find her, I won’t bother offering you money again later.”

Kincho blanched. “I-I’m being honest, I swear. Our only slave is that one Dedoldian girl. Just the one!”

Well, it was worth asking, but apparently Linia and Pursena really had parted ways. While the former tried her cards at being a traveling merchant, the latter had probably returned home to be the chief of their people. So they wouldn’t have been caught together. Pursena was probably safely home in the Great Forest.

“If you say so. In that case, keep that in exchange for Linia,” I said.

“Wh-what?! All three bags?!”

“Not enough for you? Shall I add another one? Or would you rather a magic item instead?” I reached for another tiny bag. *I’ll give you two thousand gold coins’ worth of jewels if that’s what it takes. I’ll show you how much money I’ve earned this past year, if that’s what you want.*

“N-no, th-this is more than enough!”

“No need to be bashful. I’m often away from home, and I’d hate for anything to happen to my family while I’m not around. You understand that, don’t you?”

“Y-yes, I do...”

I had to drive the point home, just in case. Negotiation by coercion, if you will. “And I’d like to be on good terms with you all in the future. Especially if the Adoldian girl I mentioned happens to become a slave or something. Or if such a thing were to happen to one of my sisters somehow. I’m just trying to coax you into showing a little consideration for me. Make sense?”

“Y-yes, your message is crystal clear. Of course we’ll show you consideration.”

“Hm, should I throw in a magic item after all? I have a hat with a gem near the band that glows and can act as a flashlight.”

Kincho’s entire body trembled, face contorted in fear as he lowered his head. “I-I understand! We’ll sell her to you! You’ve more than compensated us. We have no intention of making an enemy out of you. So please, no more threats!”

“Pleased we could reach an agreement.”

I won! A victory bought with coins—or gems, in this case!

Pleased as I was, I didn’t want any bad blood between us. Or with the Boreas family, either. “I’ll pen a letter to the Boreas family for you. Return here in a few days for it, and you can bring me a receipt while you’re at it.”

“Yes. Th-that would be...a big help.”

The moment he finished speaking, Kincho sped off, dragging his two muscleheads with him.

“Phew.”

Ahaha, oh boy... I got a little too worked up and blew through a ridiculous amount of money. One thousand five hundred coins’ worth of magic stones? I could only imagine the reason Lilia had said nothing thus far was because she was exasperated.

“My lord.”

“Miss Lilia?”

“That was splendid work.”

“Thank you.”

She smiled slightly and bowed. So she was willing to forgive my overspending, but I wasn't sure if Aisha would. *Maybe I should try to convince Orsted it was a necessary work expense and that I need compensation.*

At any rate, that matter was settled. *Did you see that just now, little Lucie? Daddy's perfectly capable of being assertive with people when he needs to be! So if you ever find yourself in a tight spot, I'll jump in to save you like I did for Linia. You needn't worry at all. Just fly right into Daddy's arms!*

“Eh?”

When I turned around, no one was there. Lucie had disappeared from her spot at the top of the stairs. My entire body slumped with disappointment.

Regardless of my personal feelings, I had managed to save Linia, and she would be living with us from now on...as a slave.

Chapter 3: The Entrance Ceremony and the Student Council President

IN FACT, Linia began working as a maid in our house. I was perfectly content to let her fend for herself, but all things aside, Linia was still a friend. If she was in trouble, it was only right to help her. Obviously.

Admittedly, I had considered throwing her to the wolves, but I didn't follow through with it, which meant it didn't count.

Also, Aisha was against letting her go free. After paying the enormous sum we did for her, she upheld that it would be a waste to throw Linia out.

"I know you're earning quite a bit, but money is still precious! I'm going to have Miss Linia work here until she pays off every last coin she owes," Aisha insisted.

Orsted paid me irregularly, and usually in the form of magic items or magic stones. After living through time loop after time loop, he probably knew every secret in this world. Naturally, he could easily round up enough money to take care of me for the rest of my life. That didn't change the fact that one thousand five hundred Asuran gold coins was a huge sum of money from my perspective. I mean, that was more than I paid for this house.

"Yeah," Eris said, nodding along. "I don't care if she is your friend, I'm not handing her over!"

So she never had any intention of letting Linia go. If I had actually tried handing her to the slave traders, she probably would have stormed out, sword swinging from her waist, and killed them all before I could blink.

Still, I rebuked her for killing those men, slave traders or not. I didn't care whether such people lived or died; I cared whether

anything happened to Eris while she was pregnant. *You never know. Murdering someone while pregnant could result in being haunted by evil spirits.* I insisted that she settle things by invoking my name or Ariel's the next time something like this happened. Although I knew that her sword would take care of the problem before she bothered to open her mouth every time, nevertheless. That was just the kind of woman Eris was. I'd pretty much given up trying to change that aspect of her.

"Well, I'm glad things turned out the way they did. That's exactly how I'd have expected you to handle it," said Sylphie. She had no qualms about hiring Linia. She knew that the two of us were friends, and in fact, she praised me for putting so much importance on friendship.

"Woof!" said Leo.

I had no idea what he was saying, but Linia seemed to get it. "Ah, yeah, I understand, Lord Leo. I'm perfectly fine bein' at the bottom of the totem pole, mew. I'll do what I'm told, mew. Please feel free to work me to the bone!"

Linia expressed no confusion over the holy beast's presence here. Apparently Leo had already explained it to her. I had no idea how exactly he'd relayed the situation, nor had I really asked much about what being a holy beast even meant in the first place. It sounded as though Linia would be beneath Leo in the hierarchy now, strange as that was. I kinda felt bad for her, being of lower status than a dog.

Linia's salary was two Asuran silver coins a month, although one of those would go towards repayment of her debt, so she actually only received a single silver coin. As part of her employment, she'd be provided with meals and a place to sleep. Eris jumped in to say that she'd personally keep Linia in her room. Linia was supposed to

be working under Aisha, but she was pretty much primed to become Eris's personal pet.

Anyway, only one Asuran silver coin a month, huh? It was generous pay considering the cost of living around here. On the other hand, considering it only amounted to a single Asuran gold coin a year, she'd have to work here for the next thousand years to return what she owed.

"Are you really okay with this, Linia?"

"Ugh, well, beggars can't really be choosers, and you *did* save me-ow. I hope you'll take good care of mew for many, many long years to come."

Linia was resigned to her fate. Like an antelope who found their neck in the jaws of a cheetah, she remained limply draped over Eris's lap as the latter played with her tail.

Well, if she says it's fine with it, I guess there's no issue.

Roxy returned home shortly after that, and expressed no opposition. Like Sylphie, she spoke approvingly when heard I'd paid money to save my friend. At least until she heard the ridiculous amount it had cost, at which point she began eyeing me extremely suspiciously.

"Did you really want her that badly? Because she's a princess or virgin or whatever?"

Fortunately, it didn't take too long to dispel that misunderstanding, but as usual, no one had any faith in my downstairs brain.

The next morning, Roxy and I set out for the University of Magic. Since there were two of us, we decided to go by foot rather than ride on Dillo. The snow crunched under our shoes as we walked.

It had been a long time since I'd stopped taking classes there, and I'd also been given an exemption so I didn't have to show up to our monthly homeroom, either. I had no reasons to go to campus any longer, but today, I had business with Zanoba and Cliff.

After passing through the path lined with magic-resistant bricks, rows of trees on either side, we found ourselves before the founding headmaster's bronze statue. Seeing the cluster of buildings around us made me emotional. After all, when I first came here, I'd been afflicted with ED.

"All right, Rudy. I'm headed this way," said Roxy.

"Okay! Work hard today."

"You too, Rudy."

As the two of us were about to go our separate ways, someone squeaked, "Ah! Professor Roxy is with a guy!" I glanced in the direction of the voices, and spotted a group of people moving between the dormitory building and main school building, pointing at us.

"Wait, don't tell me. Is that Professor Roxy's husband?!"

"What, so the legends are true?! That's Mistress Norn's older brother?"

"It's my first time laying eyes on him. He's surprisingly handsome!"

I was being treated like an exotic animal at the zoo. Still, I heard that last part. Handsome, huh? Hehehe...

I noticed Roxy staring pointedly at me.

No, you got it all wrong! I was just flattered to have a young girl praise me like that and was letting it go to my head, that's all!

“Pardon me for doing this,” Roxy said as she suddenly slipped her arms around me, then turned to the students to flash them a peace sign.

“Aaah!” They squealed as they disappeared into the main school building.

“I’m making it clear you belong to me,” said Roxy, releasing me from her embrace. Her ears were bright red. Apparently, even though she’d done it of her own volition, she was now embarrassed. “W-was it wrong that I did that?”

I stared at her silently. Of course not. I did belong to her. If she wanted to brag about that, I more than welcomed it. In fact, my heart was pounding like that of a young girl deeply in love. I planted a kiss on her cheek, enjoying how soft her skin was.

“Wh-why are you doing that all of a sudden? At a place like this, even...”

“It’s a kiss to wish you good luck.”

“O-oh, all right then...yes. Well, message received. I will be off, Rudy.”

Stiffly and gallantly as a robot she marched toward the staff building. I watched her go before heading off toward the research building myself.

“A little too early, maybe?” I wondered to myself.

Cliff still hadn’t arrived at the research building by the time I got there. He was a parent now, so no doubt he was busy. On the other hand, Elinalise had promptly withdrawn from the university after giving birth. She had only enrolled to find a man anyway, so now that she’d found one and had a child with him, it was *goodbye education*. Many would judge her for it, but everyone had their own reasons for

attending the university. Personally, I wanted to respect Elinalise and her choices.

Nonetheless, with Cliff absent, I had free time on my hands. Perhaps it would be better to visit Zanoba first instead. Although, considering it was early enough that even the diligent Cliff hadn't arrived at the school, I might only be making a nuisance of myself.

Yeah, better to save my visit to Zanoba for this afternoon. Besides, showing up unannounced often ended in embarrassment for the both of us. It was better to stick to my original plan of visiting Cliff first before going to see Zanoba.

I had wandered outside, lost in thought. The snow crunched beneath my feet as I walked, and I soon discovered a crowd of people in the courtyard. I went over, curious as to why so many were gathered. The headmaster stood on a brick stage giving a speech.

"...Magic, however, is different. Magic has a future! We will retake the magic system that we have lost, and combine the current incantation style to bring forth a new evolution with which..."

Hm, I was pretty sure I'd heard those words before. It didn't take long for me to figure out where—my own opening ceremony.

Wow, is it already that time of year?

Which year would I be in by now, anyway? My fifth year? No, my sixth? Although I only attended classes in my first and second year, I still wanted to attend graduation when it rolled around. Sylphie had similarly realized it would be a waste to not be around for hers after she withdrew from the university.

Come to think of it, if I'm a sixth-year student, that means Master Silent Sevenstar already graduated, I guess. I wondered if she had attended her own graduation ceremony. I couldn't imagine she had. Nanahoshi had spent the past few years preoccupied with learning summoning magic. She hadn't asked for my help yet, so

either she was getting all the help she needed from Perugia or she simply hadn't reached the experimental stage.

In any case, apparently she'd only enrolled in college to use their facilities, so perhaps she wasn't interested in attending her graduation. It was also possible she wanted to wait to have her graduation ceremony when she finally returned to Japan.

There was something that still worried me regarding Nanahoshi. My future self hadn't gone into details, but he had mentioned her ghastly end. I'd have to pop in and check on her when I found the time. I could bring some rice balls and potato chips when I did.

"Next, our student council president has some words of her own for our new students."

The headmaster's speech ended while I was lost in thought. He kept one hand pressed to his wig as he retreated to the line of professors. Upon closer inspection, I spotted Roxy sitting in the middle. Her posture was perfect and dignified, befitting her role.

Aww... It makes me want to get up and brag to all the new students that this blue-haired beauty is my wife. Hm, should I do it? Should I announce it for all to hear?

"...It's her."

"That's the university's most renowned..."

"She's so tiny. She's not even an adult yet, is she?"

"Bet she hasn't known the touch of a man, either."

Now that the headmaster's speech was over, the new students were whispering excitedly amongst themselves.

What's all the fuss about? I wondered. I glanced up at the stage and Norn was standing in its middle, with two people behind her: an extremely tall demon girl and an extremely muscular beastman.

"Hello, everyone. I was chosen this year to be the student council president. I'm a fifth-year, and my name is Norn Greyrat."

Norn was the student council president? That was the first I'd heard of it. I did know she was in the student council, but her ascension to the presidency must have happened in sometime in the past months.

"While I'm still very inexperienced, I want to do my utmost to fulfill the duties given to me," Norn said.

The crowd refused to quiet even when she started speaking. Norn didn't have the charisma Ariel had that allowed her to silence everyone when she spoke.

Oh well, I thought. I'll just have to use a little bit of magic to shut them up for her.

As I scanned my surroundings, I noticed someone eyeing Norn salaciously. I recognized him. Pretty sure he was in her fan club, in fact. But what the heck was he doing here? He definitely wasn't a new student.

"Siiiiiiiiilence!" echoed the beefy beastman's angry voice.

The crowd instantly fell silent.

"Thank you, Gilbert," said Norn.

"It was nothing."

She continued with her speech. "You have come from all corners of the world to this university. Among you, I am sure there are some who have led lives I cannot even begin to imagine. However, while you reside at this university, you are a student here. That means you must conduct yourself accordingly and uphold our rules."

I was also pretty sure I'd heard this speech somewhere before. Something about abiding by school regulations even if they differed from one's own sense of what was normal. When I first enrolled, Ariel had been the student council president and had given a similar speech. It seemed like the general theme of the president's speech was pretty fixed.

“...And that is all I have to say. I hope you all enjoy your lives here as students.” Norn bowed and left the stage. She walked with purpose, each step full of confidence and...

Oh, our eyes met.

In that moment, she missed one of the steps and crashed to the ground. Snickers erupted from the crowd.

Ah, what a shame. If she'd only kept it up for a few seconds longer, they'd have all regarded her as a sophisticated student council president.

Strangely, the lewd gazes directed at her intensified after that blunder. The guy from her fan club seemed thoroughly pleased, too. Clearly this world didn't lack for fans of clumsy girls, either.

So our student council president is only in her fifth year, huh? Norn sure had worked hard to get where she was. As her brother, I could hold my head up high. If Paul were here, he'd probably be hiding in the bushes with one of those super-telephoto lens cameras on a tripod, recording every second of her big moment.

It filled me with such emotion. Norn had poured her effort into so many things: her studies, swordsmanship training, and the student council.

That settles it. I've gotta give it my all, too. I need to do everything it takes to protect my family from the Man-God's grubby hands.

“Hmph. So this is the Norn Greyrat I've heard so many rumors about? She's a C. No, if I take her potential into account, perhaps a B,” said a nearby voice, completely destroying the sentimental moment I'd been having.

What the heck is this jerk's problem? I turned to look, and was met with the sight of a devastatingly handsome man. He was probably only about fifteen himself. Long elf ears hid beneath his golden-blond hair and...did I mention he was devastatingly

handsome? I'm talking Ariel-tier good looks here, with a face so dazzling it was near impossible to gaze upon him directly.

Okay, well, yeah. No wonder he was so conceited with a face like that. With those looks, he outshone even Luke, the most handsome of the Greyrat men. If this man was S-rank, then Luke would be A, and Norn would be about B.

"Everyone said she was top-tier in this school, so I was hopeful, but...that's it, hm?"

Whatever the reality of it was, it still wasn't right for him to make comments like that. He was handsome, sure, but looks weren't everything.

I mean, look, there's a bunch of upperclassmen glaring this way. They obviously think Norn is the best in the world. Oh, and uh...now they've called some friends over. I had no idea where they'd been hiding, but there were three of them now, and they were peering at him as they talked.

"Bro, that dude is yikes, for real."

"For real for real? He was talking smack about Norn? No joke?"

"Legit. For real for real."

That was the gist of their conversation. Ignore that I've dubbed over their actual voices with my own little rendition.

I hated bullying, and this elf boy was only a puny first-year. But at the same time, the fan club guys hated my guts, so they probably wouldn't listen to what I had to say. *They're already looking over this way like, "Please don't even try to stop us. This is our fight."* They looked like they'd also drag me to the rooftop and rough me up if I didn't toe the line.

"If that's all she amounts to, I bet her older brother, Rudeus, is nothing special, either," the elf boy added.

I couldn't argue that point; I was nothing special. *But let's leave me out of this, okay? I already know my looks can't match up to yours.*

He turned his head and our gazes met. "You agree with me, don't you?"

Huh? He's asking me?

"Well, sure, I guess," I said, not entirely sure how to respond. "Rudeus is no big deal, I suppose. But Norn is really doing her best, you know?"

"Hah," snorted the boy. "Oh, sorry. I forgot that the people of this city are all terrified of Rudeus. But you needn't worry. My name is Rayfort. I'm the son of the elf village's chief, Magnafort. You won't have to suffer under the thumb of Rudeus's oppression anymore."

Thank you for the polite introduction, but that just made it awfully hard to introduce myself. Now what? Guess I can call myself Ruquag Mire for now?

"I'm not like the rest of you or even Norn," he continued. "I'm a scholarship student. The only one in the last few years, in fact. Not that it should be any great surprise; I have been undertaking special education to become the next elven chief."

Ah, makes sense. So he's like Linia and Pursena. This little prince must have traveled far from the Great Forest to come here and learn about distant human society.

"I swear, I will be top dog at this university. And that Norn girl? I'll make her my woman."

Yeah, that was one thing I wasn't going to allow. No matter how rough he might have it in this new environment, he wasn't allowed to take Norn away that easily. Her big brother wasn't going to simply stand by and watch.

"All you need to do is stick with me. I promise you'll be duly rewarded."

“...Riiight,” I mumbled back.

Was that speech supposed to convince people to become his lackeys? I didn’t see how it was compelling at all, but there were no small number of envious gazes boring into me.

I was more concerned that this man was planning to organize against Norn. As Norn’s older brother, what was I supposed to do? Was it better to nip this problem in the bud so the boy didn’t have a chance to oppose her? Or was that overstepping? Was that me being too overprotective? Norn had secured a spot for herself in the university on her own. Rayfort claimed he was a candidate for future chief of his village, but he didn’t hold any political influence in this country. Besides, if he tried anything, the fan club would intervene. I felt like leaving him to his own devices would work out fine, but was that really the best course?

“I can’t let that slide,” said a voice, interrupting. Someone had swooped to my rescue. I peered over my shoulder, trembling with anticipation, but...

Who the heck are you?

“Name’s Mi’nal, son of the dwarven chief Bi’nal.”

A new student by the look of it. As conceited as he was, he was only half my height, and very clearly had the face of an adult man, with a tiny beard growing in. The man was quite obviously a dwarf, as he claimed.

“Think you’re the only scholarship student? Hah! Guess again. I’m a special student too, starting this term.”

Ah, so that’s the part he was objecting to.

Rayfort’s eyes widened as he peered down at the dwarf. “Mi, I can’t believe it’s you!”

“Ah! Ray, it’s been a while!”

It seemed the two were already acquainted. The elven and dwarven territories bordered one another. So it wasn't surprising they'd seen each other before, since they were both sons of their respective chiefs.

"So what you mean to say is *we're* the only two scholarship students this year?" Rayfort tried to clarify.

Mi'nal chuckled. "Nope, that's not right either."

There was someone else hiding in Mi'nal's shadow. It was a young boy, who must have also been a dwarf—no. He was most likely a human, just very young. About ten years old, from the look of him. His features suggested he was from Asura, and...hm, I felt like I'd seen that face before.

"Go on, introduce yourself."

The boy stammered, "M-my name is Grannel Zafin Asura. I'm the second son of Asura's First Prince Grabel Zafin Asura."

That was surprising. This boy was actually Grabel's son, huh? What was he here for? Revenge? For what happened in Asura? Was he supposed to be an assassin sent to take me down? Seemed a bit late for that. And would they really send someone so young to do the deed?

"Um, my father seems like he's on the verge of losing his bid for the throne, so he figured I'd be in danger if I stayed..."

Aha! That tracks. Grabel must have realized Ariel might take his son's life, so he sent him away. If this was his second son, then perhaps his oldest had been sent to another country? No, something wasn't right about that. Ranoa Kingdom was sympathetic to Ariel's cause. Perhaps he'd been sent here as Ariel's hostage. And not that this aside is necessarily important, but was there some rule I didn't know about saying that every big shot's son had to announce their father's name?

“I see, so you have your own complicated circumstances.” The elf boy nodded to himself. “I was actually chased out of my village after some incidents, so I guess the three of us are in the same boat.”

“Excuse you,” the dwarf sniffed. “I wasn’t chased out of my village for any special reason. I’m the third son, that’s all. Since I’ve nothing to inherit, I decided to take my chances here.”

“Yes, yes. I understand. Everyone has their secrets that they don’t wish to share. I am sure you heard that one certain rumor, didn’t you?”

“You did too?!”

The handsome elf boy—crap, what was his name again?—threw his arms around Mi’nal and Grannel’s shoulders. “Well, we’re all scholarship students here. Let’s look out for one another, yes? If we throw our lot in together, coming out on top at this school will be no mere dream. Agreed?”

“Right...”

“Um, well, I hope we can be friends,” Grannel muttered awkwardly.

I had no idea what was going on, but at least the new students were making fast friends at the entrance ceremony. Such a beautiful scene. As for the elf boy badmouthing Norn, well...I’d let that slide for now. People had a habit of trying to carve out a niche for themselves when they first started school. If I thought of those remarks about Norn being B-rank as the mutterings of a pre-adolescent who thought he was hot stuff, I felt more amusement than anger. Above all, I wished them luck.

“Ohooo! I see there’s a bunch of people gathered again this year, mew!”

A voice burst through the crowd, ruining what was otherwise a sentimental scene. I recognized that voice. It belonged to someone

who, a few years back, had been one of the university's worst delinquents.

A girl with cat ears had her hands stuffed in her pocket as she pushed through the crowd, intimidating those she passed as she made her way toward me. *Linia*. She was supposed to be attending to her duties back home, so what had she come here for?

"Isn't that Mistress Linia?"

"Who?"

"You know, the head honcho a few years back."

"You mean the delinquent?"

"But why's she here? She should've graduated already."

Whispers erupted around us.

Linia made her way straight to me. "Heya, Boss."

"Hello yourself. What did you come here for?"

"Lady Roxy forgot her lunch box, so I came to deliver it, mew. I dropped by the staff room and they said she'd be here."

That made sense, although it wasn't even lunchtime yet. Aisha must have worked fast to send Linia so quickly. Or perhaps Roxy forgetting her lunch wasn't all that rare. Incidentally, I hadn't packed lunch, either. It wasn't that I didn't want to eat home-cooked food for lunch. I'd opted out of doing it today since eating out with friends was, in my opinion, just another facet of communication.

An awkward silence fell as I noticed the two boastful boys from earlier—the dwarf and elf—were suddenly averting their eyes and staring nervously at the ground.

"Hey, what the devil is going on? I thought she'd gone back to the Great Forest."

"Well, that's what I heard."

“Huh?” Grannel interjected anxiously, glancing at the other boys’ faces. “What’s going on?”

“Hm?” Linia finally took note of their presence. She amiably waved a hand at the two boys. “Heya, Ray, Mi.”

The two flinched and glanced the other way. Apparently the three of them already knew each other.

“Hey, hey. When’d you guys make your way here from the Great Forest, mew? Hasn’t it been like a whole ten years? Man, how the time flies, mew. Doing well for yourselves? Hey! Why’re you looking away like that? I’m over here!”

Crap, this could get bad. She has that look in her eyes that she always does when she starts picking a fight with people. The kind of look a cat gives to the prey it’s stalking. And now you’ve got that poor boy Grannel shaking in his boots.

“Sorry, I think you have the wrong person,” Rayfort insisted.

“Y-yeah, those aren’t our names,” Mi’nal agreed.

“Say what?” Linia’s hands shot out, clamping down on the tops of the two boys’ heads and turning them toward her. Her voice was low and threatening. She sounded exactly like the school bully who corners you and asks you to spot him the money for a train ticket.

“Trying to tell me you’ve forgotten me? Guess it has been a while, mew. Guess it makes sense, mew. You boys don’t have very good memories, do ya?”

I suddenly understood the relationship between them. Linia and Pursena must have been the leaders of their little band, and these two were their underlings. Pretty ironic that she still acted awfully arrogant after she’d become a slave.

“N-no, perish the thought!” Rayfort quickly shook his head. “We just heard rumors that you’d gone back to the Great Forest, so we were sure you had to be someone else.”

“R-right,” Mi’nal eagerly agreed. “You look absolutely gorgeous when Miss Pursena isn’t around, so we didn’t recognize you for a second there. So, uh...have mercy, please.”

All right. I think it’s about time I put a stop to this.

The other first-years were watching from afar, full of fear. If their first impression was that the university was a terrifying place ruled by violence, it would reflect poorly on the school. This place was the first institution of education Roxy had ever attended, which made it sentimental to me. Admittedly, this school was pretty much the *only* higher place of learning in this world, but it didn’t make it any less special.

Just as I was resolving to step in and help these cute little first-year boys from the big bad delinquent...

“Hey, someone’s coming!”

“But why...”

“I-Isn’t she...”

Again, the crowd around us began chattering noisily.

Someone made their way through the cluster of people and over to me. Norn, the student council president, kept her brows drawn solemnly as she approached, her light blonde hair—inherited from our mother—bouncing with every step. The tall demon girl and the muscular beastman I recognized from earlier on the stage were close behind. Seeing them reminded me of Ariel.

So proud of you, Norn!

Yes, she’d flubbed it a moment ago, but this time she only had to deal with Linia. *Just give her a few stern words and then everyone will see what a majestic a president you really are. Don’t worry, I won’t let Linia talk back. Your big brother will stand right behind you and shut her down.*

“Big Brother!”

To my surprise, Norn slipped right past Linia and came to a stop before me, both hands on her hips. She was fuming as she glared straight up at me. “What are you doing here at the entrance ceremony?!”

Wait, so Linia was getting a free pass for her behavior? Not that I was going to let her get away with bullying those poor boys, so it didn’t really matter, but still.

“Uh, you know. This and that.”

“I was so shocked I tripped on the stairs, you know! Ugh, seriously, how embarrassing...”



“Uh, yeah. Well, your speech was great. You killed it up there. Father must be watching from heaven and—”

“That’s not what I want to hear right now!”

I was trying to praise her and just pissed her off more. How depressing.

“What are you doing here, bullying these new students, huh?!”

“Sorry?” I stared at her.

Bullying? Me? Surely you’re joking. I glanced around at the crowd. All gazes were focused on Norn and me. The way people looked at her made it clear they looked to her for protection, whereas they regarded me with fear. How strange. They were acting like I was some kind of villain.

“Tell me,” she demanded, “what did these poor first-years do to you anyway?”

“N-nothing. Although, they did bad-mouth you a bit...”
Something about her being an inferior B-rank or something, right? Yeah... I think?

“I am perfectly used to hearing those kinds of things already, so knock it off! You have them all terrified!”

I blinked at her. “Well, they’re terrified because of Linia.”

“And you’re the one who set her on them, aren’t you?!”

Oh, Scheiße. So that’s what this is about? That’s how everyone else sees this? That I’m the evil school underboss and Linia is my right-hand thug? Well, crap. I guess I have my past actions to thank for this, huh?

“In fact, I already heard, Big Brother!”

“Heard what? From who?”

Your big brother is already on the verge of tears over here. Are you really going to kick a man while he’s down?

“Miss Roxy told me a few moments ago. She said you’re keeping Mistress Linia as a...as a slave! What in the world are you thinking?”

Oh, that.

“Okay, sure. She might be a slave. But I’m not treating her like one; in exchange for shouldering her debt, I’m having her repay what she owes by working around the house. There’s nothing skeevy about it,” I said flatly.

Norn frowned and pursed her lips in a pout.

That’s right! I saved Linia. I ain’t got nothin’ to feel bad about, ya hear me?

“Nornie,” Linia interjected. “Everything the Boss is saying is true, mew. He basically saved my butt, mew.” She rubbed her hands together and slid up to us, as if trying to ingratiate herself. The two boys, meanwhile, visibly relaxed.

Norn glanced at Linia and sighed. “Oh really? Well, I suppose you don’t look like you’re in a sorry state, so it must be true.”

Good, she believed us.

“But since you have already graduated, Mistress Linia, I would appreciate it if you would please stop causing troubles at the school!”

“I wasn’t causing any problems, mew. I was just saying hi to a few familiar faces I recognized from a long time ago.”

Norn glared up at her, looking about as intimidating as a kicked puppy. Adorable.

“Okay, okay. I get it, I’m in the wrong, mew. So many people were looking, so I got a little carried away is all, mew.”

Norn’s lips drew taut as she continued staring up at Linia, who for her part scratched her head awkwardly. Apparently Linia didn’t count this as an actual fight. Maybe she might have just stopped herself shortly after anyway and declared, “Just pulling your tail,

mew! You boys make sure you don't slack off, mew!" And maybe that would have been the end of it. Though the boys truly had been terrified of her.

Norn turned her gaze from Linia to me. "As for you, Big Brother, while it flatters me that you're trying to protect me, I would like to request you not take it too far. I can take care of myself, I'll have you know."

"Yes'm, as you say!" I bowed, prompting the crowd to ooh and aah.

"She actually made *the* Rudeus Greyrat lower his head!"

"Our student council president is really made of tough stuff."

"Ah, Nornie is so cute."

Was it really that rare for me to show deference to others? I felt like I apologized and prostrated myself on the daily. Well, whatever. If something so trivial was enough to bolster Norn's reputation, nothing would make me happier.

As silence fell again, I glanced back at the three first-years, who were all paralyzed with their eyes fixed on us.

Norn turned toward them. "Um, so who are these boys?"

"Scholarship students, apparently."

"Oh, yes. I heard there would be three this year. Ahem." Norn paused to clear her throat. She pinched the edge of her skirt and curtsied politely. "A pleasure to make your acquaintances. I am the current student council president, Norn Greyrat."

The only one of their number with enough wits to form a response was the shortest, who said, "Um, I'm Grannel Zafin Asura, the second son of Asura's First Prince Grabel Zafin Asura."

"We are pleased to have you here, Lord Grannel. It must be difficult for you, coming to a foreign country with which you are so unfamiliar. While I am sure many will have much to say about your

upbringing and familial history, it is nothing you need worry about. If anything troubles you at any point, please do not hesitate to come to the student council. Once any person becomes a student, we are dedicated to acting as their ally. It matters not where you came from—we are here to support you so that you may dedicate yourself to your studies in peace.”

Those words, formal and stiff as they were, came right out of her mouth without a single fumble. I suspected she must have practiced this spiel, given how gracefully she spoke. She gave another elegant curtsy.

“Uh, yes, of course.”

“Well then, I bid you an enjoyable time at the school.” Norn wrapped up their conversation and walked off.

Young Grannel stared after her, completely dumbstruck. He wasn’t the only one; I was frozen solid too. In the short time since I had last seen her, Norn had become even more impressive. I could only guess she was taking etiquette classes.

That said, if she could already handle herself with that much grace, there was no way she’d be undermined by a couple of first-year upstarts. In fact, Rayfort had been trembling in place, his eyes glued on me for several minutes now.

Not wanting to get any further entangled in their affairs, I grabbed Linia and decided to leave the scene. She could leave Roxy’s lunch box in the staff room on her desk or something.

Three new scholarship students enrolled in the university at the same time Norn took the student council president seat. The next generation was taking the reins at the school, and with that, brand-new changes were sure to follow.

Contemplating this, I parted ways with Linia and made my way back to Cliff’s research room.

Chapter 4: Research Progress

LATELY I'D GOTTEN USED TO seeing Cliff with his eyepatch. Elinalise had made it for him, stitching in his initials, and it truly did look dapper on him. All right, maybe *dapper* wasn't the right word. There was something imposing about it. He might lack the height and musculature to be like Ghislaine, but their vibes were similar enough to me.

"Now that Ariel has left, we have the first prince's son, huh? I can already sense trouble on the horizon," Cliff muttered.

Apparently he'd met the three newcomers during homeroom. As he pondered what the future held, he sighed.

"Unlike Ariel, I think he's more or less a hostage, so try to be nice to him, please. He's so young. He doesn't deserve to be caught up in his father's battles," I said.

"Yeah, I guess. Well, I'll warn them against trying anything with your little sister, at least."

"Thank you."

We slipped into his research room as we chatted. Elinalise was nowhere to be seen. She was off looking after their child. She'd birthed countless kids over the course of the centuries she'd lived. Her child with Cliff was particularly special to her, however, so she was handling Clive with the utmost care. She was a veteran at raising children at this point, so I was sure he'd grow into an upstanding man.

Cliff retrieved three wooden boxes from his room and stepped back into the hallway with me. "All right, shall we get going?" Said boxes were thirty centimeters long on each side, a perfect cube. I took two from him. They were awfully heavy.

“Sorry to make you carry those,” he said.

“No, not at all.”

We left the research building, setting off from the campus completely.

“How is young Clive doing?” I asked.

“He’s doing great. He cries at night though, and he does demand a lot of my attention. Reminds me of my own childhood.”

I nodded to myself. “That’s right. You were raised in an orphanage, weren’t you?”

“Yeah. A lot of the kids there were abandoned by their parents. But there’s something special about looking after your own kid.”

“Agreed.”

Our destination was on the outskirts of the city, so we hopped into a carriage in front of the school and rode it to the city gates. We sat side by side and continued chatting during the ride.

“You sure are impressive, Master Cliff. You’ve become a proper father.”

“I’m not a proper anything. It only looks like I’m doing a good job because Lise is there handling everything.”

“Yeah, but compared to you, I don’t even pitch in with child-rearing once a month.”

“Raising a child comes in many forms. In your case, you have wives and maids to help out, and you are doing what’s required of you. There’s no reason for you to feel bad for not being more involved.” As Cliff sat there with a box on his lap, he spoke as if he could already guess what was bugging me. “From my perspective, you’re the one who’s got it the roughest since you don’t get to be there every day and watch them as they grow.”

“Hearing those words from Reverend Father Cliff himself comes as a great relief.”

“Indeed, should you ever feel the need to confess your sins, you need only come to me. Kidding, of course.”

At some point, Cliff had passed the exam to be recognized as a priest of Millis. Apparently it wasn't an official thing, but it did afford him a certain status while working at the church. It wasn't as if research preoccupied every minute of his time. I had to wonder if he was considering what would happen after he eventually returned to his homeland. Since I was a sixth-year, that meant he was a seventh-year. That was as long as anyone could stay at the school, so he would graduate next year.

“Master Cliff, what do you plan to do once you graduate?”

After a long pause, he answered, “I don't know. My grandfather back home hasn't sent any word, but I would like to return home at least once. I want to tell him that I got married and that I have a child now.”

“It'll be lonely without you.”

According to my predictions, Cliff's return to Millis would mark another showdown with the Man-God. Of course, that was only conjecture on my part.

“That's a ways off,” Cliff assured me.

“Yeah, true.”

As we continued with our harmless small talk, the carriage pulled up to Sharia's southern gate. I passed some coins to the driver, and we began to make the rest of the journey on foot.

We headed southeast once we passed through the gate, and after a little while, the company office came into view. It was a surprisingly large building that jutted out conspicuously on the outskirts of the city. There was a fence surrounding it, intended to ward people away.

“You know, I kind of realized it at the time too, but you really were lying back then,” said Cliff.

“Yes, well, it didn’t seem anything I said would convince you to believe me about his curse.”

“It’s not that I’m blaming you. That curse of his *is* strong. Even now...I mean, look at me. My legs are trembling.”

As we spoke, we came to the front of the building. The writing on the front door said: *Employees Prohibited Beyond This Point*. I slipped a key from my pocket and unlocked the door. Inside was an unused reception area that I’d had constructed just in case, which we passed through before heading deeper in.

“Urgh...”

The second I pushed open the door, Cliff shrank back. His eyes were fixed on Orsted, who was sitting at a desk made of high-quality lumber as he penned something. As per usual, the expression on his face was terrifying.

“Hm. So it’s you, Cliff Grimor.”

“Y-yes, that’s right. It’s me.”

“It must be difficult for you each time.”

“Wh-what are you implying...?!”

Orsted wasn’t implying anything more than the literal meaning of the words he spoke—that Cliff probably had it rough meeting face-to-face with Orsted like this, purely by my request.

“Sir Orsted, let’s take care of this quickly. We’ve brought you three today.”

“Very well.”

Cliff and I deposited the three boxes on the desk. Orsted reached for one and opened it, pulling out the full-face helmet contained inside. The others had similar helmets contained within,

though the coloring on them was different. They were separated into black, brown, and gray.

“Please try it on.”

Orsted did as suggested silently, forcing his head inside the helmet. He looked suspicious, wearing only a helmet with no suit of armor on. I personally found him even more terrifying than usual this way.

“Well, Master Cliff? How is it?”

“...No good. Worse, in fact.”

“All right, let’s try the next one.”

Orsted tried on each of the three helmets in order. Each time, we clocked Cliff’s reaction, trying to ascertain whether they had any effect at all. Once we were finished with them all, Cliff shared his opinion.

“The third one is the best. I tried using the Flac Method on the first one to transform his mana, but that completely backfired. That means it’s highly possible that your mana itself carries the curse.”

“His very mana is cursed?” I asked in disbelief.

“Yes,” Cliff said. “The moment Orsted’s—that is, Sir Orsted’s—mana enters someone’s line of sight, the curse activates. That’s how it seems to me.”

“Then maybe we could find something to cover his body with that would prevent any of his mana from escaping?”

“Certainly, if you trap him in a box with no openings whatsoever, then his curse probably won’t activate, but that doesn’t really solve anything.”

“Fair point.”

The two of us were researching Orsted’s curse. This past year, we had conducted experiments using the research he’d already done on Elinalise’s curse as a base. That was how we managed to identify

his head as the main source of his curse. Thus, Cliff developed helmet-shaped magical implements. Orsted would try them on and Cliff would offer up his responses, which was how we tested the efficacy of the implements.

Our experiments had borne some fruit. By having Orsted equip the latest version of Cliff's helmet, we managed to soften the curse's effects, albeit only marginally. If he wore that thing around town, he'd still make children cry and stray dogs cower in fear and run, and horses would likely scramble away from him, thereby overturning the carts they were pulling. However, it was enough to at least soften Sylphie and Eris's attitude toward him. Before, they'd hated him as fiercely as if he'd personally killed their parents, but that was now reduced to the level of disgust one felt toward a loathsome boss, perhaps. Not ideal, but enough for them to realize that he really was plagued by a curse, and that the reason I was working for him was because it didn't affect me at all.

It was during the course of his research that Cliff finally realized the nature of Orsted's curse and why I had lied to him and Zanoba previously. That marked an important step forward. His feelings toward Orsted were still complicated, but at least he was making do at this point.

We still had a long way to go. At present, the helmet was roughly twice the size of Orsted's actual head. There was no ventilation, so putting it on meant you had to hold your breath, and you couldn't see anything, hear anything, or speak at all. Obviously, Orsted could not wear it for an extended period. Yes, the road ahead was long indeed.

On the other hand, Cliff was pretty much a genius for managing to develop this within the mere span of a year. At the rate his research was progressing, Orsted would someday soon be able to walk around the city waving at passersby.

Cliff was pleased about the arrangement, too. Researching another person's curse provided him with additional data that he could use to construct a magical implement to free Elinalise from hers. It was only unfortunate that he would eventually return to that research once things calmed down and Elinalise wasn't so busy looking after their child all the time. I didn't see the problem with her leaving her curse be for the moment, though; they could go straight to making their second child that way.

"All right. We'll come back in a month," said Cliff.

"Very well. You really are going out of your way for me, Cliff Grimor. I never imagined you held such talent."

"Huh?! Oh... R-right. Yeah. I am a genius, after all, aren't I?"

Orsted was shocked by what Cliff's research had accomplished. In the many long time loops he'd lived through, he'd sometimes tried doing something about his curse, but after several years of testing to no avail, he'd more or less given up. Perhaps, in these two hundred years he'd lived on continuous repeat, there had been others besides Cliff researching curses who'd made some progress, but they wouldn't align themselves with Orsted.

The important thing was that we'd produced results. The next time Orsted went through another loop, he could now find a way to convince Cliff to research his curse for him. *While we're on the subject, I wonder if I'd even be in said loop? He mentioned I wasn't in the previous ones he'd lived through.*

"Rudeus."

As I was lost in thought, Orsted called to me. Cliff had left the office by that point. He was all too eager to distance himself from Orsted as quickly as possible, likely thanks to the curse's effects. No matter how much he reasoned that it was a curse producing such emotions in him, his body was convinced Orsted was an enemy. It's

like how humans know cockroaches don't hold the power to actually kill them, but they still act terrified when they spot one.

"...I appreciate this."

Being thanked like that made me grin from ear to ear. *Aww, Mister CEO, you really know how to flatter a person.* Woohoo! We should definitely go window-shopping together once his anti-curse helmet was complete. *A city date with Orsted...* Instead of a wolf in sheep's clothing, I'd get to see what it was like to be a weak and feeble sheep borrowing the wolf's skin to intimidate everyone else.

"No need to thank me. It's emotionally draining to keep this up with my entire family opposing it. Also, if you're able to go around as you please, it'll get under the Man-God's skin more. I'm only doing this for my own benefit."

"As you say."

When our CEO's illness was cured at last, Orsted Corporation would rise to become a world-class business. With that thought in mind, I took my leave from the office.

After parting ways with Orsted, I looped around the back of the house and slipped into the armory. I pulled out my miniature magic armor, a completely black suit in three parts: arms, legs, and torso. The pieces looked lightweight, but since I'd shaped them with earth magic, they were incredibly heavy. I slipped it on and injected my own mana into it, making it much easier to move around in.

"Sorry for the wait, Master Cliff," I said.

"It's fine. Shall we be off?"

The two of us headed back to the university. Zanoba was next on my list of people to visit. It was a bit of a pain to commute back and forth to the office, but we had little other choice since it would cause a huge fuss if Orsted were to actually enter the university.

“What will you be doing for lunch?” I asked Cliff.

“Good question. Think I’ll head back to my research room, drop this stuff off, then head to the cafeteria. I’ll let you go fetch Zanoba, then we can all eat together.”

“Sounds good.”

Cliff left to return the helmets while I made my way to Zanoba’s research room as instructed. I paused as I was reaching for his doorknob. In the past, I had paid for recklessly opening the door by being forced to bear witness to Zanoba’s perversions. That had been an awkward situation for both of us. As a man who learned from his past mistakes, I made it a point to knock this time before entering.

“Knock, knock...anyone there?” I called out.

“Oh! Master! What miraculous timing! Please, come in!” Zanoba responded instantly.

With his permission, I swung the door open. What I found was a geeky-looking thirty-year-old man and...a naked ten-year-old girl. Said girl’s face contorted in pain as she cradled her stomach, blood trickling between her legs.

Oh my. This is a crime scene.

“Zanoba... How could you... You put your hands on Julie?”

“This is no time for jokes, Master! Please, use your healing magic on Julie. The bleeding won’t stop!” Zanoba begged desperately.

Was there some kind of accident or something?

Julie glanced at me, eyes bleary and tear-filled. “Grand Master...my stomach hurts so badly. Please help me...”

I was no doctor, but I inspected her, driven by their pleas. There were no outward signs of injury, which could only mean it was internal. The blood was coming from her crotch, and the smell was

almost nauseating. *I'd be willing to bet...no, there's no mistake about it.*

"It's likely her period, right? Your best bet would be to call Miss Ginger," I said.

"Pardon? Oh, now I understand! Yes, come to think of it, Julie is a lady. My mind must be failing, that I did not even imagine that possibility!" Zanoba chuckled to himself.

Julie glanced at him worriedly. "Master?"

Julie was already nine years old. Or was she ten now? Either way, it seemed awfully soon for her to be having her period, but perhaps this was the norm for dwarves? Then again, perhaps the traders had been mistaken about her actual age when we bought her? Not that it mattered.

"Ah, but before we worry about that, we should eat lunch," Zanoba said. "Julie, you may rest for today. Will you be all right by yourself, lying here until Ginger returns?"

After a long pause, she muttered, "I'm scared. Master, I want you to stay with me."

"Hm..."

Ooh, what's this I hear, Zanzan? Sure are popular, ain't ya? Cheeky little rascal.

I shrugged. "Well, that works too. I can go buy some stuff for us. We can eat here."

So Julie's already a woman, huh? I planned to wait until she reached adulthood to put our plans into action, but I'd noticed recently that her total mana pool had stopped growing. It was probably about time for us to get started.

After leaving, I briefly rendezvoused with Cliff, bought some food, and then returned. I was back in Zanoba's research room

within an hour or so. The three of us were currently munching away on our food, huddling together. Ginger was close by, seeing to Julie. At this point she was more of a maid than a knight.

We considered moving rooms to give Julie some space, but she insisted we remain close by because she was anxious. We finally settled upon staying to keep her calm.

“Master, how is the magic armor doing?” Zanoba asked.

“Not bad. I was able to stop a monster’s attack with it. Although I still feel like its performance is a little unreliable. It may be fine against beasts, but it’d be rough going up against a swordsman in that thing.”

“Indeed. You are sacrificing defense, mobility, and your own self-regeneration power in the process.”

I nodded. “But to achieve the same level of capability as the prototype, we’d need to make it bigger.”

We’d made several different versions of my magic armor in the past six months. At first, we thought to merely replicate all the functions of the original in compact form. That didn’t turn out too well, but it wasn’t entirely surprising: the first one employed the most cutting-edge technology at our disposal, which included a number of mysterious techniques that the Man-God had shared with us. Trying to duplicate the original meant we weren’t able to reduce the suit’s size by much. Sure, we managed to make something very slightly smaller than the first, but at the cost of functionality, which kinda defeated the point.

From there, we continued with the trial and error, which resulted in annulling the magic circle we’d drawn on the torso. We kept the magic circles concentrated to the arm and leg pieces instead, fashioning them so that they extended to the shoulder for the arm pieces and to the groin for the leg pieces. With that, we successfully managed to cut down the size and the cost of mana for

equipping it (although it should be noted that it was still such a mana guzzler that I was the only one who could actually wear it).

With that, we succeeded in creating Version Two, which consisted only of the arm and leg pieces but forced us to put a power limit on them. Since the chest piece would not have mana channeled through it, the leg and arm pieces would be torn off if I went full throttle with my magical power—it wasn't like they weren't being held down by anything.

It was a shame the suit had such high functionality but could only wield power equivalent to that of an advanced swordsman. That was why I decided to add a new torso piece with supplementary magic circles that would prevent the arms and legs from being torn off. This led to the current incarnation of the armor: Improved Version Two. Its power rivaled that of a saint-tier swordsman. Ideally, I'd want something more powerful than that, but we were still far from that. Ideals were always beyond one's fingertips; the world never worked the way one wanted it to.

"Well, guess there's no real choice but to keep using this and improve it as we go," I said.

"Agreed," Cliff said with a nod.

Eventually, I wanted to craft a suit that he could wear as well.

"That said, Master, what about the gatling gun? How was it?"

"That thing is a smidge too lethal, so I think usability will be a bit limited."

I put a lot of thought into my weaponry, too. I had one of Roxy's acquaintances craft a gatling gun for me. In accordance with Orsted's advice, I had the design simplified, altering the device so it could discharge roughly ten Stone Cannons nearly simultaneously. Almost like the Five Finger Flares spell from *Dragon Quest*...except not quite as badass and more like a shotgun.

The gatling gun was one of my countermeasures against the Water God Style. According to Orsted, the Water God Style was based around brushing off the opponent's magic. Since my shotgun fired each round almost instantaneously, with minimal lag between each one, it was highly effective. This strategy wouldn't work against opponent in the king tier or above, but it was quite a useful little weapon otherwise—save its length and lack of maneuverability.

I'd tried all kinds of things, but nothing had given me the solid leap in power I wanted. I continued dedicating myself to physical training and practicing magic, but since I had a job, I wasn't often at home. That made it difficult to find extra time to for more training. I could only rack my brain for better ideas. I had only faced small fries lately, but there was no telling when the next powerful opponent might appear. I didn't care if whatever attack I came up with was a one-hit wonder that would be useless afterward, but I needed something that could take a person down in one shot.

"Come to think of it, Zanoba, how's it going with the automata?" I asked.

"Ah, that research has been on pause. Part of it is because I have hit a plateau, but I have also been prioritizing the research that will ensure your survival, Master."

"Oh... Well, sorry about that."

"Hahaha! I am enjoying the process of creating this Magic Armor as well. There is nothing for you to apologize for. If anything, I should be the one thanking you," he said, rapping lightly on my armor with his fist.

What a stand-up guy.

"Oh yeah, Zanoba—since Julie is a woman now, I think it's about time we kick off our plan to sell those picture books and figurines. Think you're up for it?"

"Hmm..."

The picture books and figures were a key part of my plan to improve the Superd Tribe's reputation. The first was already pretty much complete. Unbeknownst to me, Zanoba had already bought the dyes and produced a completely painted figure. I had a few nitpicks, such as the hair being not quite saturated enough, the cream color on the spear being a bit too strong, and the skin color being too bright, but those were inconsequential.

I'd left the prototype on some shelf at the head of my bed, which resulted in Roxy screaming bloody murder when she woke up and discovered it one morning. As soon as Norn heard the news, she stole it and took it to her own room. This made it pretty obvious that people would recognize the figure as a Superd.

The picture book came out nicely as well. Norn penned the text, while Zanoba was in charge of the art. Neither were particularly talented, but their work was unique, with the sort of soft touch that children were often fond of. We also included a chart for learning how to read letters at the back of the book so it could double as a textbook. I figured people were less likely to throw it away if it served such a practical purpose.

Now all we had to do was make block prints so we could mass-produce it, then add color by hand. Our work lacked the professionalism and standardization of a printing press, but it wasn't so bad since most books in this world were made by hand anyway. I had already made it a habit to bring along a book and figurine with me when I set out on one of my jobs to save people, never missing an opportunity to proselytize. Which was all fine and good, but we needed to take a more concerted approach.

"That will be a bit difficult," Zanoba said, frowning.

"The cost?" I guessed.

"No. We have plenty of funding as it is, and Princess Ariel is providing additional financial backing. I have received word that

she's already set up our workshop in the Asura Kingdom as well, so there's no problem on the production front, either. The issue lies in the sales themselves. We have no connections with any merchants."

"Ah, that part..."

Come to think of it, I'd never considered who we'd get to actually sell them. I had contemplated opening my own shop so I could do it myself, but given my current circumstances, that wasn't going to happen. We needed a salesperson—someone to peddle our merch for us. I couldn't think of anyone in my circle of acquaintances with the necessary business acumen.

"I wonder if we'd be better off seeing if Ariel could introduce us to someone," I muttered.

"Her Highness does appear to be quite busy lately. Her coronation isn't far off. I don't think it would be wise to trouble her when she has so much on her plate," said Zanoba.

"True, and putting ourselves further in her debt won't do us any favors either."

Better to put the plan on hold for now, then. Oh well, it wasn't like we were in a hurry. We could wait until Julie was legally an adult. *So basically, another five years...*

Oh, that's right.

"Zanoba, do you think it would be possible to teach Julie the fundamentals of business for the next five years?"

"Possibly, yes. But I feel she would best serve us as a craftsman. If we want someone to serve as a merchant for us, we should consider buying a different slave for that."

A different slave, huh? It would be best if we could find someone who already had an interest in business, who could read, write, and do math, and who was also pretty well-known. It would be great if they were popular with the people and skilled at marketing.

Wait, there's a slave just like that...

Nope. No, actually, I don't know anyone who would fit the bill!

There was no way I could leave my business to a derpy cat who got herself scammed and turned into a slave. I'd be better off buying someone new for the job entirely.

"Hmm... I think we should iron out all the details of our plan before we set anything into motion," I said at last.

"Agreed."

Indeed. I needed to plan this out carefully. Being too hasty would only lead to failure. I had taken my own sweet time up till this point, so there was no problem with taking another decade to get everything together.

"All right, we'll leave that topic for another time then. Shall we work on improving the Magic Armor instead?"

"Yes, Master. In fact, I already have a vision in mind for the next version of your armor."

After we finished our food, we continued our research meeting for a bit before parting ways. My Magic Armor's performance was slowly but surely improving.

The sun was beginning to set when I dropped by the staff room to pay my respects to Vice Principal Jenius. I found Roxy working there and hovered around behind her, only for her to lose her temper with me and drive me out into the hallway. I was dejectedly hunched out there when Norn strolled by, having come to return the key to the student council room. We decided to walk home together, the three of us, for the first time in a long while.

"Norn, was there anything in today's lesson you didn't understand?" Roxy asked.

“No, I didn’t have a problem, Miss Roxy. Your lessons are as easy to comprehend as ever.”

Roxy and Norn chatted pleasantly beside me. The two had become awfully close without me even realizing it. Gone was the awkwardness that used to hang between them.

“I’m trying to be careful so it’s all easy to digest, but please tell me if there’s anything that doesn’t make sense,” said Roxy.

“If that happens, I hope you’ll take the time to teach me personally.”

“Hehe, I charge a lot for private tutoring, you know.”

Their lively conversation warmed my heart the whole way home.

“We’re back!” I called out when I spotted Lilia and Zenith in the garden, watching the sunset together.

“Welcome back, everyone,” Lilia said.

Zenith was silent. At this point she hadn’t changed much. For better or worse, her condition seemed to be stable. I wondered if her memories were really gone forever. I hadn’t discovered anything that could help her, and I was so busy with other things that I couldn’t really look into the matter in earnest. Recently Lilia and Sylphie had been trying some methods of their own but to no avail.

“We’re back,” I announced again, once we were inside the house.

Sylphie came shuffling out from deeper within and said, “Welcome home, Rudy, Roxy...oh, and Norn.” My beautiful wife was wearing an apron, and Lucie was tottering along behind her. When she spotted Norn, she scrambled over to tackle her.

“Nornie! Welcome home!”

“Lucie! I’m glad to be home!” Accustomed to this greeting, Norn swept the little girl into her arms and stroked her head. It was

obvious how much Lucie liked my sister by the way she beamed up at her. But the moment her eyes met mine, she hid herself in Norn's shadow.

Aww, you seriously don't have to act that displeased by me.

"Norn, did we plan for you to stay with us today?" Sylphie asked.

"No, but I heard about Mistress Linia coming to stay here, so I decided to come take a look."

"Ah, that..." Sylphie nodded thoughtfully. "The circumstances were a bit complicated. Rudy basically saved her." She sighed to herself.

What? What's with that sigh?

"Is he adding another one to his harem?" asked Norn.

"Hmm, I'm not sure about that," said Sylphie. "As wild as she seems, Linia does seem pretty fond of Rudy. And she is pretty erotic..."

They were talking as though I was going to put my hands on Linia. Admittedly, she was quite voluptuous and appealing. If you asked me if I wanted to take a midnight tumble and wrestle her in bed, I'd be lying if I said no. That, however, was an entirely different matter. I was a man of reason, after all, not entirely ruled by carnal desire.

"What did Miss Eris say about all of this? She wasn't against it?" Norn tilted her head.

"She's claimed ownership over Linia and refuses to hand her over to Rudy."

"Ah, so that's it..."

Come to think of it, where is Eris?

I asked the question as soon as it occurred to me. "Sylphie, where's Eris?"

“Taking Leo for a walk. I keep telling her that she’s pregnant so she should give it a rest, but she won’t listen to me. Seems like every afternoon I look out and she’s practicing with her sword again. I understand she’s past the precarious stage of her pregnancy, but what is she going to do if she causes herself to miscarry?”

Eris was the same as ever. I only wished she’d keep the jumping and leaping to a minimum. She was certainly strong, but the baby inside her wasn’t. It made me worry if she could actually safely carry it to term.

“Oh, welcome home everyone!” called a voice from above. I shifted my gaze and glimpsed Aisha at the top of the stairs. “You guys have to see this!” She excitedly turned around and beckoned at someone.

A woman stepped up to the railing, wearing the same maid outfit as Aisha. She came down the stairs and stopped at the landing to spin in a circle. As her skirt danced through the air, it gave me a brief glimpse of her thick calves. The girl then posed like a *gravure* model and said, “Mewhaha!”

Literally a catgirl maid.

“I made some adjustments to some of Mother’s old clothes and created an outfit for Miss Linia. What do you think? Cute, isn’t it?”

It was definitely cute. Even the girls present breathed sighs of admiration.

So Aisha made that by hand? She claimed it was a used outfit, but it looked brand-new to me. *I guess maybe the fabric itself is old.*

“Why put off tomorrow what we can do today? I’m going to have her working her tail off!” Aisha declared.

“Yes’m, ready for duty, mew!”

“Let’s start with the cooking!” Petite little Aisha led the way with the much taller Linia marching behind her. The two were in high

spirits as they filed past us and began preparations in the kitchen. It was kind of entertaining to see Aisha so pumped up.

“Mistress Linia certainly does seem to be in high spirits,” Norn commented. “I figured she would be much more depressed about being reduced to a slave.”

That’s because Linia’s an idiot. It’s like swallowing something piping hot; it burns at first, but once it’s down the hatch, you forget how it felt like magma on your tongue.

After that, our whole family sat down together for a meal for the first time in a while. I even got to hop into the bath with Eris once we were finished and see just how big her belly had gotten. Before it grew too late, Sylphie and I tucked Lucie into bed. I gave magic lessons to Aisha and Norn as soon as they got out of the bath, then stopped by with Lilia briefly to talk about Zenith’s future. I stared the whole time Roxy breastfed Lara before bed. And finally, I had a little bit of sexy time with Sylphie before nodding off myself.

It was a satisfying day. Starting tomorrow, I would spend every day training for a while. *Gotta work hard.*

Chapter 5: Signs of a Family Falling Apart

TEN DAYS PASSED.

I spent that time living out of our company office while training from sunrise to sunset. When Orsted was around, I worked on building my stamina in the mornings, did mock battles in the afternoon, and took lessons inside the building in the evening. I made sure to clean my room before bed and organize documents. The cycle would continue over and over in this way.

On days when Orsted wasn't around, I spent all day training. I would equip my Magic Armor and work on the different forms Orsted had taught me until I was too exhausted to continue. Then I would contemplate different patterns of coordinated attack. Sylphie would occasionally bring me a lunch box, and while she was around, I'd team up with her to see how my coordinated attacks played out in reality. She wasn't here today, though.

The forms Orsted taught me were ones the Dragon God Urupen had developed and left behind four hundred years ago. He was known more colloquially as one of the Three Godslayers, which also made him one of Perugius's comrades.

Among all the Dragon Gods in history, Urupen had the smallest mana pool, at least according to Orsted. He was the weakest of all the candidates for the title of Dragon God at the time, and no one thought he would manage to earn it. But it was Urupen who developed a whole new and unique Dragon God Style. With that, he was able to not only claim the title for himself, but also play an integral part in Laplace's defeat. Urupen was still revered in modern times as the most prominent genius in history.

Urupen's Dragon God Style involved using as little mana and power as possible to corner an opponent. Orsted managed to locate

the book of secrets he left behind and successfully used it to teach himself Urupen's fighting style and the quintessential technique: Holy Dragon Aura.

The part about not using mana wasn't very useful for me, but the idea of pinning down an opponent with minimal effort was something I could get behind. Plus, his style of weaving martial arts with magic in close combat suited me and my Magic Armor well.

Today's plan included mentally simulating coordinated attacks again. First up was my Stone Cannon. With a direct hit, it was capable of even injuring Orsted. Its potency was staggering—on the same level as the Sword of Light. That made it the natural linchpin of my coordinated attacks.

Next was Quagmire. I had used it so many times that it was the one spell in my repertoire I could conjure the fastest. It was best to place it at an opponent's feet when they were charging forward at top speed, where it served as a good launching point for going on the offensive.

Electric took a bit more time to conjure than Quagmire did, but it was highly effective since it could pierce through a person's battle aura and paralyze them. There were many times when Electric would work against opponents unaffected by Quagmire. It was best to couple them: use Electric first then follow it up with Quagmire. Once I had my enemy rooted in place, I could use Deep Mist or Frost Nova to throw them off-balance.

Stone Cannon was generally more than enough for pure offense. The rest of my spells were for stopping my opponent in their tracks or trying to limit their movement. No matter what it took, I had to make them drop their defenses so they couldn't dodge my attacks or brush them off. Then I would finish them off with Stone Cannon. If I could pull things off in that order, I was practically guaranteed victory against any opponent...or so Orsted assured me.

Most important was making this sequence of attacks second nature. If I could do that, then it didn't matter if my opponent pulled moves I'd never seen before. I would still be able to respond without delay.

To recap, this was main outline:

Quagmire → Enemy makes a move → I use magic to respond → they make another move → I respond to that with my magic again, pin them down, and hit them with a Stone Cannon.

Yep. Talking about it was easy enough. The main issue was some swordsmen could cut right through mana and magic alike, and there was no guarantee I'd get the drop on them every time. It was highly likely any supplementary magic I tried would be ineffective. That made it tough.

Incidentally, Orsted had taught me some spells above King-tier for multiple different elemental schools. I hadn't accomplished much with that knowledge, though. Most offensive spells above King-tier apparently consisted of arranging a combination of spells from Saint-tier or below.

Let's use the Emperor-tier water spell Absolute Zero as an example. All you had to do was increase the speed and potency of Frost, which itself was a combination of Water Cascade and Icicle Field. Absolute Zero let you skip drenching the opponent with Water Splash, instead allowing you to freeze a wide area in an instant.

I could already use Absolute Zero. It was no big deal; I'd already acquired spells up to Emperor-tier. That was why when Badigadi said I could call myself an Imperial Earth mage when he saw my Stone Cannon. Ordinarily, there was no way to increase the potency of Stone Cannon, but in theory, it could be strengthened using the same process of combining spells like with Absolute Zero.

Since I had already learned up to Saint-tier magical spells in each of the four offensive schools, one could say I had already mastered

all there was to master. As for God-tier spells, I probably wouldn't be able to use them anyway. Apparently you needed an enormous amount of mana and extremely fine control over said mana, in addition to using an insanely long incantation and a magic circle to help control the spell. As Orsted told it, the potency of these spells was such that they could change the landscape. Some of the strange geographical features in this world were actually the results of such magic.

Frankly, I was still pretty crappy when it came to drawing magic circles, and I didn't see a point in using magic on such a grand scale. Solid foundations, practical experience, and combined magic—those were the three things I needed. Best to start from the ground up, as with all things.

“Rudeus.”

Orsted returned while I was immersed in my magic training. I immediately whipped around to bow to him. “Welcome back, sir!”

“Indeed.”

It was an employee's duty to properly bow in greeting when the CEO showed up at the office. Having only one employee probably felt a little desolate to him, but we had to hang tight until Cliff concluded his research. When we eventually hired in more employees, I wanted to make them all bow their heads in unison to the CEO. So what if they called our company shady as a result?

“We have work,” said Orsted.

When I first started bowing to him and acting all polite, he commanded me to “act normal,” but he'd grown used to my antics by this point.

“You'll leave in three days. I'll explain the details to you now,” Orsted said.

“It would be my pleasure to carry out a mission for you, sir!”

I received my work commissions directly from Orsted himself. It seemed he'd already determined my next assignment.

"As usual, it's not a particularly challenging job, but you should say your goodbyes to your family before you depart."

"Yes, sir!"

And so, I returned home for a little while.

"Welcome back home, mew! Boss! Uh, no...not Boss...Master!"

The moment I returned home, I found our catgirl maid sitting by the main entrance, legs neatly tucked beneath her. *What has this little minx done now? Did she mess something up?*

"Yes, it's nice to be back, Linia. But what in the world are you doing here?"

"Mewhaha... Well, I made a teeny tiny screwup, so I'm out here reflecting on my mewstakes." Her ears sagged, looking as depressed as she now sounded.

"So that's it." If she was busy thinking about what she'd done, it was best to leave her be. I strolled past her and made my way into the house.

"I'm home!" I declared.

Lucie peeked from the shadow of the door leading into the living room. *Ah, she's going to make a run for it again, isn't she?*

Much to my surprise, she instead darted out from the shadows and flew toward me, her little footsteps echoing as she latched onto my leg.

"Daddy! Welcome home!"

What's going on? Why does she seem so happy to have me back here today?

“That’s right, I’m home, Lucie!” I reached down to lift her into my arms, but she darted behind me, clutching tightly to my robe. For whatever reason, she was being awfully affectionate today. *Daddy couldn’t be happier!*

“Mommy! Daddy’s home!” she bellowed.

“Yes, I heard you!” Sylphie called back, her voice echoing from the bathroom. “Hold on a second!”

“Mooooommy!”

Sylphie must be in the middle of washing the clothes or cleaning the bath. Either way, Lucie called for her mother again and again. She eventually grew tired of waiting and relinquished her hold on my robe, scampering off toward the bathroom.

What was that all about? Well, whatever her motivations, there was no use overthinking it. Children would be children. I was always the one chasing her for attention, so maybe she decided to be considerate and indulge me for once.

I wandered aimlessly around the house. Lara and Leo were together in the living room, the former sleeping soundly. She seemed to be in good health today. From there, I moved to the kitchen, where I found Lilia prepping for our next meal. Her face looked quite heavy with exhaustion. What could be tiring her out so much?

“Miss Lilia, I’m back,” I said.

“Welcome home, my lord.”

“Are you feeling fatigued?”

“No.”

Her face looked a bit paler than normal despite her denial. “I think maybe you should rest.”

Lilia shook her head. “It’s nothing to worry about.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

If she insisted, then I wasn't going to push her on it, but it still made me worry that I might be pushing her too much. “If you're feeling physically unwell, please don't hesitate to take a break,” I told her.

“I appreciate your concern, but I truly am fine.”

I was going to take her word for it, but if it wasn't physical exhaustion, perhaps it was something mental. In other words, anxiety. “Did something happen?” I asked instead, changing tack.

After a short pause, she answered, “A short time ago, Lady Eris left to go to the school.”

“Eris did? Why?”

“She claimed she's supposed to teach Lady Norn swordsmanship today.”

Swordsmanship, huh? Ah, my pregnant wife really was a restless thing, wasn't she? Maybe Eris was aspiring to be an instructor. I wouldn't oppose that, of course, but I did wish she'd rein it in a bit while she was pregnant. She was making me worry.

“My apologies,” said Lilia. “We all tried to stop her from leaving, but before we knew it, she was gone...”

“Oh, it's okay. Thank you for trying.”

Eris wasn't the type to do what she was told anyway. No wonder Lilia was exhausted. Perhaps I needed to have a stern word with her myself... Though, it was debatable if she'd heed anything I said either. Hm. Sylphie was equally unlikely to get through to her, but Aisha was better than anyone at presenting a persuasive argument, so maybe she could convince Eris.

“That reminds me, where is Aisha?” I asked.

Lilia forced a smile. “She's in the rear garden.”

As Lilia said, Aisha was indeed in the rear garden. She sat in a corner, her shoulders noticeable trembling from behind. As strong as she was, she seemed oddly vulnerable right now. Was she crying?

“Aisha?”

“B-Big Brother...welcome home.” Aisha glanced over her shoulder at me, her tone perfectly normal. I scrutinized her face but could find no sign that she’d been sobbing at all. “Haah...” But she did immediately sigh.

I noticed she had a shovel in her hand and was digging a hole in the corner of the garden. When I peered into said hole, I found a number of porcelain shards. I recognized the patterns on them. There was a cup handle in there too, which I also remembered from somewhere. I’d seen it on a fancy teacup Aisha had bought long ago with her own allowance. As far as I knew, she was incredibly fond of that cup. She would always use it whenever she had tea.

Aisha had allowed me to use the cup just once in the past. She’d worn a happy grin on her face as she declared, “You’re the only other person I’ll let use this cup.” She also said something like, “See? Doesn’t drinking from a good cup make the tea that much better?”

Honestly, I hadn’t seen any difference. The only thing that stood out in my mind was how happy she’d looked and that the tea had been quite tasty.

And now, her beloved cup had been shattered.

“Hey, Big Brother...” Her voice was low and threatening, like I’d never heard it before.

“...Wh-what is it?”

She was livid, fuming with quiet rage. Oh crap. Had I done something wrong? I had no qualms about apologizing if the situation called for it, but saying sorry when I didn’t even know what I’d done wrong would be like pouring fuel on the flames of her ire.

So what do I do? What could have caused this?

While I puzzled over it, Aisha turned her gaze to me and said, "Can we get rid of that cat?"

"Sorry?"

That cat? What cat? Oh, wait. She was probably referring to the feline seated at the front entrance with her legs neatly tucked under her.

Aisha shook her head. "Oh, I guess it would be wrong to get rid of her. We could sell her to those slave traders...or rather to Miss Eris's family. Judging by the way they talked, her family would pay a high price for her, right? Maybe they won't give us one thousand five hundred Asuran gold coins, but they'd give us at least half, right?"

"H-hold on a second. Calm down. Let's have ourselves a seat, okay?" I conjured a chair with my earth magic and motioned for her to sit.

Aisha fished a broken shard out of the hole, which she threw at my feet before plopping down on the chair. "See that? It's not particularly expensive, mind you, but it's not something you can get your hands on anymore. The person who made it died, and the shop that sold it went under."

"Well, anything like that is going to break eventually, you know," I said, conjuring a chair for myself and taking a seat in front of her. I wanted to try to get her to calm down a bit first.

"I know that. I'd hardly get that pissed off over a single broken cup."

"All right."

For starters, it seemed Linia had been the one to break the cup, which upset Aisha. She claimed she wasn't angry, but she was clearly fuming.

“It’s just...I don’t think that cat is cut out to be a maid at our house. When she tries to wash dishes, she breaks them. When she tries to clean the house, she shatters mirrors. When she tries to wash the laundry, she gets the sheets covered in fur.”

“Everyone fails when they first start out,” I reminded her. “Linia may look a little rough around the edges, but she actually comes from a pretty noble family and has been kinda spoiled.”

“Well, I...!” Aisha raised her voice and started to say something, only to swallow her words. Perhaps she meant to argue that she never made such mistakes when she started out. “When she was cleaning the living room, she nearly splashed water all over poor little Lara, you know?”

“She did what? H-how did that happen?”

“She was cleaning some place high up and carrying a bucket of water in one hand and a rag in the other. Then she somehow lost her balance and started to fall.” Aisha paused and said, “Well, I guess that didn’t end up being that big of a deal, though.”

Did that rotten cat not even know how to clean? Thinking back, I had gone into her dorm room once before. It had been quite the pigsty as I remembered it.

“Not that it was good that she did that,” Aisha amended. “But I wouldn’t protest her employment here over something so trivial. Miss Norn is even worse than that and a slow learner to boot.”

“Excuse you. No need to take potshots at Norn.”

“Potshots?” Aisha furrowed her brows. “Oh, well, it’s not like I’m trying to badmouth her or anything. My point is, that cat isn’t that bad at learning things. Once she makes a mistake, she tends not to repeat it. But still...” She breathed a sigh. “That furball won’t apologize.”

“Oh?” She wouldn’t apologize? Well, that certainly wasn’t good.

“Whenever she makes any mistake, she doesn’t act the least bit ashamed and just says, ‘Mewhahaha! My bad, my bad. I’ll be more careful next time, mew!’”

For what it was worth, that probably *was* Linia’s way of apologizing. But an apology doesn’t carry much value unless the person receiving it feels satisfied by it. If you only get further under the other person’s skin, then your apology is meaningless.

“That’s not good,” I said.

“You think so too, right?”

Personally, I’d probably forgive Linia, but Aisha was her boss. She needed to have a crystal-clear understanding about that.

“So, come on, Big Brother. Let’s fire her, please? I’m begging you. I can’t take working with her anymore.”

It was rare for Aisha to speak so disparagingly of anyone. Her patience really must be at its breaking point. Even so, nothing that catastrophic had happened. The shattered cup was merely what pushed her over the edge after a number small, trivial offenses. On their own, they were simple to laugh off and forgive, but they’d piled up enough for Aisha to lose her patience.

Yeah, but even so...

“I get what you mean. Linia does have a habit of getting carried away, and she has her shortcomings as well. Still, this must be a hard situation for her. She’s probably only acting cheerful because she’s trying desperately to acquaint herself with her new surroundings. Maybe that’s why it looks like she doesn’t feel ashamed at all for her mistakes. But you did say she hasn’t really repeated the same screwups, right?”

I figured Linia must be doing her best. People had a habit of making the same mistakes, but it was possible to reduce the chances of that happening. That was the point of reflecting on one’s actions. If Linia hadn’t repeated the same slip-ups, then it was obvious that

she was trying to improve. When I saw her at the front porch, she seemed to be genuinely thinking about what she'd done. I got the impression she felt bad about it, too.

"Nonsense. That furball probably doesn't feel the tiniest bit of remorse. I mean, her attitude is all weird to begin with. She acts super subservient to Miss Roxy, Miss Eris, and Leo, but she's kind of cheeky when it comes to Miss Sylphie." Aisha's lips curled outward as she pouted, insistent that Linia was in the wrong. She sure could be stubborn.

"You think she has an attitude with Sylphie?"

"I mean, she's way more casual with her than with Miss Eris. And sometimes she calls her 'Fitz' too."

It was a while ago and didn't last all that long, but the two *had* been at odds when they attended the University of Magic. In a way, they probably were a lot less formal with each other. I shrugged. "That's probably just because they've known each other a long time."

"I hope that's really all it is, but ever since Linia's arrival, the whole house has been weird."

Weird, huh? Now that she mentioned it, we'd never had this kind of problem when Roxy or Eris came to stay here. "Anyway, I'll make sure she apologizes properly if she messes up again," I said. "As for the things she's destroyed, we can add that to the debt she owes. I'll also lecture her about fixing her attitude and acting like a proper maid. After I do all that, would you be willing to give her a little bit longer and see how things play out? For me?"

"Ngh..." Aisha grunted, lips still gathered in a pout. She snapped her eyes shut and turned her head away. Seeing her act this way, I suspected she really just wanted to vent her frustrations and that her anger had all but subsided.

"Hey, come on, Aisha. I know she's a mess, but she is my friend."

After a very, very long pause, Aisha finally said, “Well, I guess I can forgive her this one time for your sake.” She hopped to her feet and faced me. “But, Big Brother, even ignoring how I feel about the matter, things aren’t going to end well if they keep up like this.” Then she went back into the house.

I made sure to give Linia a thorough talking-to after that. She gave me a perfunctory, “Yessir, mew,” but seemed a little too casual about it for my liking. I hoped she took my words to heart.

Later, when Eris returned home with Roxy, I warned her against doing any intense exercise for a while. She folded her arms and frowned at me, huffing, “I know that!”

I could tell this was an instance where she said she understood but really didn’t. At least she wasn’t charging outside and brandishing her sword everywhere. Once her tummy and thighs grew a bit bigger, she’d probably start taking it easy. That didn’t stop me from worrying, though. I hoped the baby was hanging on in there. *You have Eris as a mom and me as a dad, so I’m sure you can do it. Go, baby, go!*

Thanks to Aisha’s sullen mood, dinner that evening was unusually gloomy. When we finished our meal, Sylphie whispered to me, “Linia hasn’t gotten used to living here yet.” She wore a guilty look as if she felt responsible. There was no reason for her to, but perhaps because I was leaving the house in her care, she felt like it was her duty.

As Aisha warned me, perhaps things really were headed in an unfortunate direction. Would it be best for me to step in and deal with it before I left for my next assignment? Or was it wiser to stand by a little longer and watch how things played out? Hmm...

I decided to sleep alone that night since it was both Sylphie and Roxy's time of the month. Frankly, after going without for ten whole days while training, it was kind of rough not getting any. I had little recourse otherwise, though; these days happened.

"Rudeus."

As if sensing the needs of my libido, or perhaps spurred on by her own, Eris showed up just outside of my bedroom. She had her arms crossed as usual, legs braced in a wide stance. She'd been wearing warmer pajamas lately, but today was clearly a special occasion since she was wearing a negligee I only normally saw her in when we were having sex. The thin fabric barely covered her bulging belly.

Tsk, tsk, Eris. Your tummy will get cold wearing that.

"We're doing it," she declared.

"No, we are not."

Our baby was too precious. It was the rule here not to have sex when one of the girls was pregnant.

"But you want to, right? I already heard Sylphie and Roxy can't do it."

"It's fine," I assured her. "I'll just go without today."

"You're my husband. There's no need for you to go without." Eris promptly grabbed my hand and yanked me to my feet. She was so powerful that I had no choice but to be dragged along into the bedroom.

Oh crap. I don't like how things are going. If we do it once, we won't be able to put on the brakes and stop there. And that was the problem. Forget how much she was exercising already during her pregnancy—we couldn't add to the physical activity.

“Wait, Eris. Let’s stop. It’s not good to do it when you’re pregnant. We’d both regret it if you had a miscarriage or something. I absolutely can’t take that. I mean it.”

“I know that. That’s why I’ve been watching myself this whole time.”

Watching herself? Going to the school and walking the dog—she called that “watching herself”? Well, sure, it was probably good to get some exercise instead of remaining sedentary the entire time, but, uh, still. Maybe it was just a matter of us having different ideas of what was appropriate. Maybe I was just being a worrywart.

No, no. That’s a completely different matter altogether.

“And that’s why, here!” Eris dragged me all the way to the side of the bed and pulled back the blanket.

“M-mew...” Linia was underneath, lying in my bed. She was wearing something similar to Eris’s nightgown, looking beguiling even as she curled her body inward.

“If you can’t have me, then have your way with Linia!” said Eris.

“Meew...” Linia glanced up at me with resigned determination, as if she’d given up fighting against this. The fabric of her negligee was so transparent I could almost see the peaks of her breasts. She had a tight waist but proper muscles over the rest of her body, which made her legs nice and thick. Her cat eyes gleamed in the darkness.

Rather than feel aroused by this sight, I was so dumbfounded that I gaped at Eris. “What is going on here?”

“I told you! Linia!”

My Eris was telling me to have sex with Linia? Despite her affectations of nonchalance, she was actually quite the jealous one and used to pout when she caught Sylphie and I fussing over each other...but now that same girl was telling me to sleep with someone else?

“Uh, Eris, doesn’t this kinda...you know, count as cheating?”

“It’s not cheating since she’s a slave. That’s what my grandfather and father always said. Besides, it’s no secret since I’m right here, so there isn’t a problem!”

Sauros, Philip, get your butts over here and take a seat on the floor. Keep your backs straight! Miss Hilda? Miss Hilda, are you there? Please scold these two men for me. Your husband has taught your daughter some very weird and inappropriate things!

“Ahh, Mommy and Daddy back in the Great Forest...your poor little girl has become a slave and now she’s going to be a sex toy starting today, mew...” Linia muttered under her breath, saying some kind of a prayer.

So she wasn’t willing after all. It was best to put a stop to this. I couldn’t let her be dragged into Eris’s selfish whims.

“As for you, Pursena...I’ll be leaving you in the dust, loser. Victory’s mine this time, mew. Suck it.”

Okay, I guess maybe not so unwilling after all. Maybe it was okay if she consented then?

“Linia,” I said, stretching my hand toward her.

Linia’s whole body jumped. “Mew?!” She stiffened up, but didn’t try to run.

I slid my hand past her thighs to her tail. She had the kind of supple muscles you’d expect of a carnivore, but she was soft in all the places a woman should be, too. My hand traveled up her back, feeling along her waist. It was tight and toned, tempting me.

“I-It’s my first time. Go easy on me, mew.”

I didn’t respond to her request.

“I-It’s scary if you don’t say anything, mew! Mwehehe, you know wanna... Just kidding! Meeew?!”

I gathered my strength and lifted her princess-style in my arms. I made my way toward the adjacent room while carrying her, using my foot to manipulate the doorknob and nudging it open. Darkness spread out before me in the cold hallway. And that was where I unceremoniously dropped Linia.

“Mroooow?!”

She landed with a thump. I slammed the door in her face and locked it for good measure. *There. Now I can rest at ease. The evil has been expunged.*

“Hey! Boss, aren’t you being a little cold?!”

I can’t hear you. There’s no more enticing monster cat in my house, no siree. My fidelity remains intact.

“Hey, Rudeus! What are you doing?!” Eris had trailed me, nearly clinging to my back, but her protests weren’t going to sway me.

“Eris, please don’t get the wrong idea about me. The person I want in my bed is *you*. I don’t need that cat.”

“R-really? If you’re sure, then I guess...but I can’t do it with you ’til the baby’s born. Got it?”

“Of course, I understand.”

And there you have it.

“Boss, open up! If you leave me out here like this, you’re gonna leave my pride as a woman in tatters, mew!” Linia was beating on the door, but I ignored her. As far as I was concerned, she didn’t even exist. Yep! Nothing out there but the wind.

“Boss!” Linia said again, this time raising her voice even louder. “I’m beggin’ ya, mew! I’m sick of Aisha picking at me constantly!”

Perhaps she and Aisha really did have clashing personalities for her to say something like that. It was strange. Aisha had sewed that maid outfit for her only days earlier, and they seemed to be on good terms then.

“I wanna be your lover at least so I can rise in rank here, mew! I don’t care if you just use me for my body, mew. I’m beggin’ ya, Boss! Please! I’m definitely not hoping to get pregnant with your baby so I can give birth and become your fourth wife, which would in turn completely erase all the debt I owe. Honest, mew!”

Oh. So that is what you were planning. Then again, I couldn’t really blame her for it. She owed us such an exorbitant amount that it would take more than a lifetime for her to pay it all back. Even so, I had no intention of using her as a sex slave. It would be a lie to say I had no interest in getting dirty, but Linia was my friend. I wanted to *stay* friends. I already had two daughters, and after that conversation I had with Aisha this afternoon, she would be livid if I slept with Linia now. Roxy and Sylphie probably wouldn’t look too favorably upon it, either. If I gave in to momentary lust and cheated on them like this, that might cause our whole family to collapse. I couldn’t let that happen.

“Gwaaah! Waaaah! Aaaah!”

A cry echoed through the house. It appeared Linia’s shouting had managed to wake Lara. *Well, now what? Perhaps I should open the door for now and at least shut Linia up?*

In the second I hesitated over what to do, a door outside burst open.

“Hey, Linia! Do you have any idea what time it is right now? You woke up both Lucie and Lara!”

“Meowch! Fitz! I-I’m so sorry, mew. I didn’t mean anything bad by it, honest, mew!”

“My name isn’t Fitz, it’s Sylphie! Anyway, it’s late, so keep it down!”

“Y-yes’m.”

Sylphie’s scolding was enough to silence Linia. I could hear the reluctant thumping of her footsteps as she slowly dragged herself

away. It was probably safe to assume she'd retreated to Eris's room, where she usually slept.

Lara continued crying for a short while after that, but she quieted down soon enough. With that, silence fell over the Greyrat household once more.

I couldn't help feeling bad for Linia. While part of this was admittedly her own fault, she was being kept like a pet with no real way to return the money she owed. Her job performance was abysmal, and she was struggling to work amicably with the head maid, Aisha. With no other option, she thought to sell her body to her master in hopes he'd take a liking to her, only to be rebuffed instead. For all I knew she was crying into her pillow right now.

An uneasy atmosphere had settled over the house. Aisha was gloomy, Lilia was exhausted, I'd heard Sylphie shout for the first time in a very long time, and Lara was sobbing her eyes out. Maybe Eris' jaunt to the school earlier and her attempts to let me have sex with Linia was her way of dealing with the mood in the room. Don't get me wrong, her actions made it clear she didn't really understand how to handle what was going on, but she was trying in her own way.

Regardless, tensions were growing. The worst part was that Linia, the main culprit, didn't even seem to realize her attitude was the cause of all of this. I always thought she was the type who could read the room. Maybe she wasn't emotionally stable right now, given that she'd become a slave, was shouldering enormous debt and had barely escaped being sold off to some people she didn't know. If that was the case, it was my duty as the person who forked over the money to buy her to find some way to resolve this.

Starting tomorrow, I guess I'll look for a job she can do that doesn't involve cleaning, laundry, or cooking.

Chapter 6: Starting a Business

I COULDN'T LEAVE LINIA in the house. The atmosphere had worsened with her presence, and if she kept tempting me sexually, there would come a point where I could not resist her any longer.

Our family would fall apart if I didn't do something. If I lost control of myself and cheated, Sylphie might take Lucie and leave. For all I knew, the future foretold in that diary might still come to pass despite how hard I'd worked to subvert those events. I had to stop it before it came to that.

That was why I decided to find Linia another job. I had considered canceling her debt and getting her out of the house, but even though we were friends, there were boundaries still. The amount of money I spent to buy her was obscene by anyone's standards, and she needed to return it. It would do me no good to compromise on that.

But what job might suit Linia? I couldn't picture it, frankly. She could manipulate magic and fight, but off the top of my head I couldn't think of any work that would help her return what she owed.

I racked my brain for ideas. I considered paying her to help Cliff and Zanoba with their research. Her grades were respectable when she graduated, so it was possible she might be of some use. But then I realized doing research didn't suit her personality. She would not be able to commit to repetitive office-type work. Also, despite the probability of any hanky-panky happening being low, it didn't feel right to push someone as bewitching as her on Cliff when he'd just had a kid.

I also considered entrusting her with the responsibility of overseeing sales of Ruijerd's figure, but I quickly gave up on that

idea. She went into debt the moment she tried her hand at being a merchant. Since she'd already proved inept there, I was in no hurry to trust her.

Sending her off to the university to be Norn's personal maid was another option, but I immediately dismissed it. Norn wouldn't be pleased with the arrangement, and it would most likely cause an encore of what was happening at home.

I could make her work as an adventurer to earn some coin. Except that, while some jobs paid well, most didn't. Linia wasn't even licensed as an adventurer. It would take her too long to start making decent money at it, and there was a possibility she'd die in the line of work before she ever did.

None of the options I considered offered a way of paying back the one thousand five hundred Asuran gold coins she owed in a reasonable amount of time. Still, it was too soon to throw in the towel simply because I couldn't think of something. Maybe she was better suited to one of the options I'd considered than I had realized. For that reason, I decided to bring her to the university with me.

Linia wore her maid outfit as we navigated the school grounds. She walked in front of me, acting high and mighty as she threatened the other students to make way.

"Shoo, shoo! Boss is comin' through, mew! Make way for him if you don't wanna be stepped on!"

It was hard to see her as anything but a common street hooligan.

"Yo, long time no see!"

"Heya!"

I considered stopping her antics, but the male beastfolk we passed greeted us happily, so I decided to keep an eye on things a bit

longer instead. Only two years had passed since Linia graduated, so many students here still knew who she was. Some of those about to graduate might even have served as one of her subordinates when she ran the place way back. Perhaps the answer as to what job I could assign her lay somewhere in this mess.

“Mistress Linia! Haven’t seen you in a while!”

While I was lost in thought, one of the boys strolled up to us. *Who the hell is this?* I felt like I’d been introduced to this person before, around the time I was a second-year. I couldn’t recall his name, but I did remember him being top dog of his class.

“Oh hey, it’s you! Got some fighting spirit in you, mew?”

“Sure do!”

“Good! Keep that up, mew.”

“You got it!”

Linia truly acted like she ruled the roost, despite wearing a maid outfit while drowning in debt.

“Anyhoo, Mistress Linia, you sure everything’s okay?”

Linia tilted her head. “Mew? What d’ya mean?”

“I mean, your current situation. I heard about it, you know. They say the student council president’s older brother is keeping you as a slave. That right?”

“I guess. Kinda screwed up big-time and landed myself in this sitch, mew. Still, it’s the beastfolk dream to serve under someone stronger than them, so it’s not so bad, mew,” Linia said proudly.

The student breathed a sigh, and after a long pause, said, “To be honest, I’m kinda disappointed.”

“Why’s that, mew?”

“Before you graduated, you still had guts—like you fully intended on taking back your position at the university from Rudeus and Ariel. But now you’re like...a puny house pet.”

Linia went silent after that. I figured she would bare her fangs and lash out in anger, but...she merely chuckled.

“Yeah, guess I have fallen pretty far. But just you wait, mew. I’ll claw my way up again, mew!”

“Claw your way up?”

“You got it, mew. If you wanna claw your way all the way back to the top, you gotta hit the bottom first, mew.”

The student’s eyes lit up with the realization of what she was saying, a smile breaking over his face. “Mistress Linia, I knew you had it in ya! I guess I just wasn’t clever enough to pick up on your plan!”

“Well, my brain’s built a lot better than most, mew,” Linia said proudly, tapping her forehead.

In no time the student was gazing at her with respect and showering her with praise. Once he was finished, he finally left to return to his classroom. *Well, I guess it’s great they get along.*

I kept quiet as we made our way to the research building. The whole way, people continuously paid their respects to Linia. It wasn’t until we slipped into the building, where no one else was around, that it finally stopped. As we shuffled through the halls, bathed in silence, Linia glanced over her shoulder at me.

“Boss, just so ya know, that was just me talking tough, mew.”

“You mean with that underclassman?”

Linia rubbed her hands, sidling up to me as if she were trying to ingratiate herself. “The part about me clawing my way up. Gotta save face in front of the younger kids, but I have no intention of opposing you, Boss. You feel me-ow, yeah?”

“Right.”

Knowing her, she probably did mean what she had said. Especially with the weird vibe of her last sentence, I suspected she was just trying to placate me. Her true intentions were probably what she'd told that student.

"There's nothing wrong with ambition," I told her. "But I'd advise against spitting on the very people you should be grateful to."

"Of course, mew. If you think I'm lying, let's go into one of these empty classrooms and I'll prove my loyalty, mew. I just ask that you be gentle with me. Mwehehe!"

Hahaha...yeah, no.

I wondered if her talk of clawing her way up was less about trying to outrank me and more like trying to be my personal number one? First by becoming my sex partner, then earning enough affection to be my favorite wife, thereby usurping the ruling triumvirate of Sylphie, Roxy, and Eris. *What a crafty little thing!* Perhaps she was actually an assassin sent by the Man-God to force my family apart.

"Hey," I said in a low voice. "In these past few years, have you had a guy claiming to be a god show up in your dreams?"

"What's this all of a sudden, mew? Some kinda prophetic dream? I don't remember anything like that, mew."

"Trying to hide it won't do you any favors," I said, threateningly. After all, in Dragon God court, the suspicious get the guillotine. Not that I was quite that violent.

"Th-the dream I had yesterday was about a buncha fish falling from the sky, mew. Uh, the one before that...erm, I can't remember."

Must be nice to have such pleasant dreams. No doubt she'd get one point per fish, and by the time she collected a hundred, she'd be rewarded with an extra life. Of course, if she wasn't careful, she might fish up a dumbbell or something.

That aside, she didn't seem to be one of the Man-God's apostles... as far as I could tell, anyway. He wasn't the kind to employ someone as wild and unpredictable as Linia.

"That's enough of that then, I guess. But if you do happen to have any dreams like that, you better tell me right away," I said.

"Yessir, mew."

I sighed and started toward our first destination: Zanoba's research room.

"Ah, Master—urk!"

Zanoba pulled a face the moment he spotted Linia with me. "It's...been a while," he said.

"Yo, Zanoba. Sure has been a spell, mew."

Cold sweat beaded on Zanoba's forehead as he scanned his room. "Pardon me, but please a moment while I clean up a bit." He hastily began stowing away every displayed doll or figure into a box for safekeeping. It didn't matter if they were fragile or not; he did not leave a single one out. Julie was halfway through painting a Ruijerd figure, but she stopped work to mimic her master, cleaning her desk area.

"Hm. This should be acceptable. Very well, let us speak over there." Zanoba motioned to a table that was a bit removed from his work area.

Julie pulled away from her desk and started tottering over, only for Zanoba to put up a hand. "Julie, you keep working," he said.

"Understood, Master."

Linia, Zanoba, and I took our seats at the table. Zanoba seemed restless and turned to Ginger, who was standing in the corner of the room. "Ginger!"

"Yes, Your Highness!"

He didn't issue any explicit commands, but she moved to stand between the table and the work area, as if protecting it.

"Now then, Master," Zanoba said, turning his gaze my way. "What business brings you here today?"

Even as he asked, he kept sneaking glances at Linia, not letting his guard down. He hadn't said anything, but he probably wasn't pleased about allowing Linia inside his research room. I felt bad for imposing.

"Nothing too special," I said.

"Hm."

Judging by his attitude toward her, there was no way I could let her help out with his research. As I'd expected—or perhaps even worse than I'd expected—the two clashed too much. Linia bullying him and destroying his figure had left a lasting impression. It was just like with Aisha, save for the bullying part: Linia breaking her beloved teacup had been the last straw. Zanoba was maintaining a cool façade, but if I asked him to let Linia help out, that same façade would probably shatter.

"By the way, Master, why is Linia accompanying you today?" Zanoba asked. "I heard you were keeping her as a maid at your house, but..."

I shrugged. "It's a rather long story, actually. I'm trying to find her a job."

"Oh...I see..." His eyes darted back and forth. Maybe he had some idea of what kind of work she could do, but at the same time he didn't want to be saddled with Linia.

Don't worry. I'll take her back with me, I promise. This was a good example of how past misdeeds could bite you in the ass down the line.

“Well, that’s enough of that,” I said. “Let’s discuss your research next.”

“Oh, yes, a splendid idea!”

After I indirectly made it clear I wasn’t going to push anything onto him, Zanoba returned to his usual, cheerful self and started discussing the magic armor with me.

We ate lunch in the cafeteria. While I discreetly enjoyed my meal in a corner by myself, Linia sat a short distance away, surrounded by people.

“Mewhaha! And that’s when I told her, mew. ‘Pursena, aren’t you a bit of a chubster?’”

“That’s just like you, Miss Linia!”

“Takes some real guts to say that kinda thing to Miss Pursena!”

I didn’t realize it back when Ariel was around, but Linia had her own charisma, the kind only a delinquent possesses. The people who clamored around her were all unsavory sorts. It occurred to me that she could use that skill to accomplish something, but what? Some kind of job involving gathering people...hmmm.

Well, for the time being, I’ll try stopping by Cliff’s place.

In short, things didn’t pan out there, either. Cliff had some things he could use some help on, but much like Zanoba, he wasn’t too fond of Linia. He didn’t seem keen on having her work with him. Honestly not a big deal: working for him wouldn’t be earn her enough to repay her loans quickly, anyway. It’s not like he had vast wealth at his disposal.

With that out of the way, now what?

“Couldn’t you have her help you out with your work?” Cliff suggested when I asked his advice.

My work? As in, help me make it so Orsted was the world's master puppeteer rather than the Man-God? Yeah, there was just one little problem there.

"I could do that if Sir Orsted didn't have that annoying curse," I said.

"The curse doesn't trigger unless she comes into direct contact with his mana, so it'll be fine as long as you don't let them meet."

Oh yeah, that's right. Well then maybe...no, absolutely not.

"If we're both working out of the same office, she'll end up running into him eventually," I reasoned.

Cliff nodded. "That's a good point, now that you bring it up. Plus, there's also the fear that, as one of the beastfolk, she might get hit with the curse from his smell alone."

The curse could affect her via its smell? That was the first I'd heard of that. How intriguing. "Are you implying that beastfolk can smell mana?"

"Yeah. There's no conclusive evidence yet, but I do feel like it's a distinct possibility. Since you have Linia with you, it might not be a bad idea to test it out and see. What do you think?"

Perhaps smell was another source of Orsted's curse, which meant we'd need to work on doing something about his scent as well. If Cliff was onto something here, we could use some kind of deodorizer to completely suppress his curse. That meant testing to see if perfumes and the like could overwrite his natural smell. A dash of floral cologne, and his scent and the curse could be neutralized. He'd smell nice and pretty wearing that big helmet over his head. Mm, yes, it painted a disturbingly bizarre picture.

"In that case, I'll do a little research into that," I said.

"Right. On that note, it'd probably be best if you could get an Adoldia to help out. I hear their noses are the most sensitive."

So we needed a dog for this rather than a cat, hm? I wondered how Pursena was doing. Had she managed to become the village chief?

“If we’re looking for a keen sense of smell, hm...” I stroked my chin. “It might be a good idea to test this out with all sorts of races, not just beastfolk.” It was said that non-human beings could perceive a different range of colors. Most of the humanoid races in this world didn’t seem all that different from one another, but even so, there were demon eyes that could perceive mana. If we researched the differences between races, we might be able identify the cause of the curse right down to the specific particle responsible.

“You make a good point, but even among beastfolk and demons, there are a bunch of different subraces. It would be a difficult task to gather them all.”

“True enough,” I agreed.

The population of Sharia was quite diverse, in part because the University of Magic accepted all students regardless of race. Though that wasn’t to say that you could find someone from every single race here. People came and went rather quickly. We would have to round up individuals from even the rarest subraces, test them one by one, and use that data to pin down a central cause, which would be dizzyingly overwhelming. Of course, that was the nature of research—testing one variable after another until you’d narrowed it down.

“In any case, we can’t make any progress before we gather test subjects,” I said.

Cliff nodded. “Yeah. Though, I can’t really go anywhere, and I’m no good at drawing people in anyway.”

Which was true: Cliff definitely lacked communication skills. Not that I was one to speak.

“We need someone popular. Someone who can draw people to them without effort...”

Naturally, our gazes were drawn to Linia. True, she had a habit of attracting shady characters, but at least she could reel people in. Plus, the more people she drew in, the more would naturally want to sign up. Rather than selectively gathering only what we needed, we could widen our sample size to begin with and lower the risk of missing out on anything.

Of course, having more people would lead to more problems. There were always going to be bad apples. Sometimes, people who wouldn't normally do wicked things on their own might feel emboldened in a crowd and go on to commit heinous acts. A group of people with no one to lead them were no better than a bunch of hoodlums.

In the past, Linia had managed to tame the other delinquents at the university and bring them under her heel. To me, that showed leadership potential.

“Wh-what’s this all about, mew? Y-you two planning to gang up on me-ow?!” Linia squeaked. She had been lounging in the corner of the room, yawning to herself, but the moment she felt our eyes on her, she jolted.

But how would we go about this? Sure, Linia could effortlessly draw people to her, but we could reel people in more efficiently if we had something to bait them with. And what usually made people come together? Money. Where there were profits to be had, people tended to congregate.

What about an event with prize money? No point, because the crowd would only be temporary. So, a business then? Though then we would need funds to start out with. I could use my own finances for that, even though that seemed to defeat the purpose, but if I considered it an investment, it didn't seem so bad.

Ah! That's it! I realized. We could use the people we brought in to help with Orsted's work—or mine, rather.

Thinking on it more, it had been exhausting to do everything by myself. Having an organization to provide support sounded quite promising. And not just that—they could take on the simpler jobs for me as well. We could help three or four people at a time, instead of just one. That would make the future easier on Orsted. It was possible the Man-God might try to interfere by manipulating one of our members, so we couldn't entrust any of the truly important tasks to them. But since I was under Orsted's patronage, it wasn't so easy for the Man-God to interfere with any organization I ran from the shadows.

But what about when I didn't have any work to do? Having a bunch of extra mouths to feed would be a big financial drain. I'd have to hand out work assignments one by one. How should I go about that? Hire them out as temp workers to other places when we didn't need them? Nah, Orsted had plenty of money. Perhaps it'd be best to operate like a general trading company; we could invest in people with talent and make them do all kinds of odd jobs.

I wondered if Linia would be able to manage all that. My guess was "Not likely." Someone would have to be hired to support her. Someone good with numbers. I had the perfect person in mind...and I had something else to talk to them about while I was at it. This was perfect.

"Linia," I said.

"Wh-what is it, mew?"

"Starting now, you're going to be recruiting people for us."

Linia tilted her head. "Recruiting them for what, mew?"

"Good question. We're going to bring together like-minded people to do all sorts of odd jobs—business sales, mercenary work, you name it."

“A-and how are we gonna fund that, mew?”

I thumbed my chest. “I’ll provide the initial funds. Those who successfully complete missions will have a bit skimmed off the top as a fee. A portion of that will come back to me to repay the initial costs.”

If that wasn’t enough to cover it, then I could always explain the circumstances to Orsted and ask him for support. Depending on how things went, we might even look to Ariel for financial assistance.

Linia blinked at me, clueless. “Uh? O-okay then, mew. So where are we gonna gather these people?”

“I plan to start preparing a location now.”

“Now? You sure this is gonna end well, going into this without any kinda plan, mew?” Linia pulled a face, neither entirely opposed to the idea nor convinced.

Make no mistake, I didn’t think it would be all smooth sailing. We could begin by recruiting around ten people, most of them probably beastfolk. If we could make good use of them, we should be able to bring in some decent profit. We might be able to find someone with a talent for business to sell our Ruijerd figures in the process.

“There’s no way of knowing whether it’ll go well or not till we give it a shot,” I assured her.

“Personally, I’d really don’t wanna add to the ridiculous debt I’ve already got, mew...” Linia frowned anxiously.

It was no surprise that her first failure weighed on her, but she couldn’t keep earning the bare minimum, living the rest of her life as my slave. If things stayed the way they were, my family really would fall apart. I really would have to resort to using magic to leap back through time if that happened.

“Better put your back into it to make sure that doesn’t happen,” I warned her.

“Urgh...” Linia still didn’t look entirely pleased, but she nodded in agreement in the end.

We stopped by a real estate agent on our way home and purchased a building to use as our office. It was rather small, and in a poor location, but right now all we needed a roof over our heads to serve as our headquarters. The price was what you would expect, and I planned to count it off as a business expense. I currently had Aisha cleaning the place.

“This’ll be our base of operations for now,” I said.

“Gotcha, mew.”

I really hoped to recruit some good employees to our new business soon. We needed someone to organize documents and oversee paperwork. Sadly, there was a chance we’d have to dismiss them if they got hit with Orsted’s curse, so we had little choice but to hire those who’d be expendable.

“These are our current funds.” I handed Linia the equivalent of ten Asuran gold coins, which was more than enough to jumpstart a business in Ranoa Kingdom.

“W-wow... Y-you’re really gonna give me this mewch?” Linia’s eyes lit up as she fixated on the money.

It was just like casting pearls before swine, or in this case, gold coins before a cat. They had high value, but giving them to an animal oblivious to that value was pointless. Perhaps the takeaway was that trying to teach an impulsive creature the value of money would only

lead to them impulse spending, so it would be best not to hand over the money at all. At least, that's how I interpreted it.

"Heh...hehehehe. Boss, I've got your back, mew. With this much cash in hand, I swear I won't fail you, mew. This time I won't screw things up, mew."

Great. Linia's eyes had turned into solid dollar signs. Now I was the one feeling anxious. Handing her such a fortune was probably a bad idea, wasn't it? I had to leave on an assignment for Orsted shortly. By the time I got back, Linia might have doubled her debt somehow and be relegated to churning a giant hamster wheel in our basement. Or maybe Eris would decide to make her a pet for real and slap some kind of fancy collar or ribbon around her neck.

I had an idea how to prevent that from happening.

"Big Brother, I've finished the cleaning," said Aisha.

Yes, indeed. It was Aisha's time to shine.

"Aisha, I have a favor to ask of you."

Aisha frowned. After a long pause she looked up at me and asked, "What?" From her sullenness, it seemed she was still sore about the conversation we'd had the other day.

"I'd like you to watch over Linia for me. Make sure she doesn't use that money I gave her on anything stupid, and while you're at it, provide support so she doesn't royally mess anything up."

"...I have housework to do back home, though."

I nodded. "And that's why you don't have to do it all the time. Checking in once every few days will be enough."

Aisha stole a couple of glances at Linia. "Do I really have to?"

After what happened the other day, she probably wasn't keen on the idea of working together again. Her reluctance made me worry about Linia's ability to gather people, but...hey, even the Rafflesia flower has no trouble gathering insects to it.

Now... while Aisha was reluctant to honor my request, I had a good reason for entrusting this to her.

"You absolutely don't *have* to do it," I said. "But I do think it would be best if you did."

"Why? Because I was the one who said I wanted to make her a maid to begin with? Or is it because you think it's my fault the mood in the house is so gloomy?" Aisha grumbled.

I knelt down to meet her gaze. She normally looked me in the eye, but today she kept turning away. "That's not it," I told her.

She pursed her lips.

"It's just...when you realized that Linia was a big screwup, you immediately tried to get rid of her, didn't you?"

"Yeah, because she's absolutely useless. I figured it'd be best to get rid of her before she caused any more damage."

Linia was standing in the periphery, looking hurt by the conversation. I ignored her.

"But if we flip that around, we could also say you weren't able to properly draw out Linia's real talent," I said.

"...Yeah. I was the one who taught her the work, so I guess so."

"Which means," I continued, "it was your failure."

Aisha's eyes widened for a moment, but her expression soon turned indignant. The look in her eyes seemed to say, *I haven't failed at anything!* Perhaps I didn't word it well enough.

Erm, let's try this again...

"You see, Aisha, I don't think it's right to immediately discard someone simply because they did something wrong."

Aisha shrugged. "Yeah, I know. I think that part of you is pretty amazing, too."

“Thank you. And that’s why, while I realize I’m forcing that ideology on you by saying this, I don’t want you to be the kind of person who abandons people in the future.”

Aisha was a capable girl. Moreover, she was a genius, which meant she could do anything she put her mind to and do it well. Unfortunately, it was for that very reason that she had a hard time understanding people that weren’t as competent as her.

My future self’s diary told me that Aisha stuck by me until the very end, but the future had already changed in the present. Perhaps she would eventually leave and try to find work elsewhere. I figured she’d have no trouble making it out there, but I didn’t want her to be a nasty piece of work who cut everyone off if they couldn’t do everything perfectly. She would just wind up ostracized, a black sheep. Or worse, it could encourage someone else to try taking her down a peg.

I wanted Aisha to learn her lesson before any of that happened. I didn’t know that lesson was, exactly, but it was definitely something she could only learn by associating with others.

“Can’t I convince you to start over from the beginning with Linia one more time, as equals?”

Aisha glanced between Linia and me. Then she closed her eyes. One second passed, then two. She spoke not a word, as if lost in thought.

“Are you asking this for my sake?” Aisha finally asked.

“That’s my intention... Although honestly, I do think that with you supporting Linia, we can at least avoid the worst possible outcomes.”

“All right. Thank you for being honest.” She opened her eyes, gazing at me anxiously. “Say, Big Brother, if I refuse...would that make you hate me?”

I shook my head. "Of course not. If you really don't want to do it, it's fine if you refuse."

Aisha timidly reached for me. When I opened my arms in turn, she wrapped her arms around me and squeezed tight.

"Okay," she said. "If it really means that much to you, I'll give it my best."

"Thanks."

Despite how arrogant I must have sounded, I didn't think I was wrong. This would be good for her; surely she'd learn something hopping into a new line of work with Linia. And that, I thought, was wonderful. *Or I want to believe it will be, anyway.*

Totally off-topic, but boy had Aisha's breasts grown without me noticing. She had to be somewhere around a D-cup. Her back was so tiny, but her chest was so voluptuous. *I guess she is what they call busty petite.* With a little bit more volume, they'd be about the same size as Lilia's. Not that it mattered, of course. She was my little sister.

"Thank you," said Aisha.

"No, I should be the one thanking you for listening and letting me explain."

"I'll do anything you tell me to." Aisha grinned mischievously pulled away. At least her smile was still the same. She beamed at Linia as well and extended a hand. "Well, there you have it. Let's give it our all!"

"You got it, mew!"

The girls exchanged a firm handshake. Things hadn't gone well the last time they were boss and subordinate, but I hoped they would forget the past and make things work this time.

Before we finished, I explained the gist of my plan to Aisha as well as my hopes for its future. Then, we adjourned.

In the meantime, though... *I can only pray that I don't come home to anything too horrible.*

Chapter 7: A Company Venture

“H_{AAH... HAAH...}”

The young knight Lienhard, who had only barely turned fifteen, found himself at the very top of Quagmire Tower. His hands were tightly clenched around the hilt of his sword as he gasped for breath.

“Kehehe. What’s wrong, hero? Is that all you’ve got?”

Standing before him was an ominous figure in a gray robe wearing a suspicious white mask.

“Do you really think you’ll be able to defeat the evil, all-powerful magician Rud—err, ahem—Ruquag Mire with those puny attacks?”

“D-dammit!” He adjusted his grip on his sword. As he plodded forward, his legs felt like lead, but he still managed to slash his weapon through the air.

The ease with which Ruquag Mire avoided the blow made it seem like he was mocking Lienhard, and then he thrust his right hand toward the young knight. In an instant, an invisible shock wave rippled through the air, throwing Lienhard backward.

“Gaah?!”

“Ah! Lienhard!” cried a beautiful girl chained in the corner of the room. She wore a light peach-colored dress, and atop her head rested a tiny golden crown. This girl was the princess of Toile, a small kingdom in the Northern Territories.

“Fear not, princess! I’ll defeat this perverted fiend quickly, and then the two of us will return home together!” As he gave this rousing speech, Lienhard forced his unsteady body back up, flashing the best smile he could muster at Gertrude.

“H-hey!” Ruquag Mire cut in, flustered. “Who are you calling a pervert, huh?!”

“You, obviously! You robbed the princess of her underwear, and if that wasn’t bad enough, you put them on your head! Have you no shame?!”

“You’ve got it all wrong! I brought these from home, I’ll have you know. Honestly, how rude!”

It didn’t matter who that underwear belonged to. Lienhard was the only knight left; if he lost, Princess Gertrude would fall into Ruquag Mire’s grubby hands. It was only a matter of time before he really did put the princess’s panties on his head.

“Graaaaah!”

“Is that all you’ve got?”

Lienhard charged at the magician, but Ruquag Mire dodged with impressive speed, almost like an insect, and sent Lienhard flying back with another shock wave. He’d been doing the same thing the entire fight.

“Guh...” Lienhard groaned. “Dammit. I can’t...let you have your way...with our princess.”

Lienhard’s body was covered in cuts and bruises, but the fighting spirit had never left him. Spurred on by a strong sense of duty, he lunged at Ruquag Mire once more.

“Kehehe! Sure are a loyal one, aren’t you? But think about it. Even though the king’s daughter was kidnapped, he sent only a pathetic handful of people to her rescue. Is that really a man worthy of such loyalty?”

“It has nothing to do with him or the country. I’m doing this because...because I...I love the princess!” Lienhard shouted at the top of his lungs, his voice echoing throughout the tower.

Overwhelmed with emotion, Gertrude pressed both hands over her mouth, a tear trickling down her cheek.

“Raahh!” Lienhard roared once more.

“Kehehe! What a touching display of love. Sadly for you, love’s not enough to overcome the gap in power between us!”

“Gaaaah!” Once again, Lienhard was sent hurtling through the air. “D-dammit... I can’t even get close to him. What am I supposed to do...?!”

“Kehehe!” Ruquag Mire cackled. “There is no way you can defeat me. Perhaps if you possessed my greatest weakness—a Superd statue and the picture book that goes along with it, depicting the man’s many achievements... But without that, it’s impossible! Bwahahaha!”

“Ah!” Lienhard sucked in a breath as the realization hit him. The mention of a Superd statue clued him in. In fact, while he was on his way here, a suspicious fortune-teller did some exaggerated divination without even asking his permission and then forced the demon statue upon him. The fortune-teller swore the statue would eventually come in handy, but he never would have dreamed that it was the key to this fight!

Lienhard made a jump for his bag, which he’d left discarded by the doorway. He fished the statue from it—it depicted a warrior with emerald-green hair and a white spear in hand. Along with it, he pulled out the very picture book Ruquag Mire had mentioned.

“No! Don’t tell me?!” Ruquag Mire gasped.

“That’s right. The Superd items you fear so much!”

“Yes! The very man who has been painted a villain by the whole world but is actually incredibly kind and deeply loves children... A legendary hero who played a vital role in defeating Laplace... The statue of Ruijerd Superdia!”

Honestly, Lienhard knew nothing about what he was saying. He hadn’t read the picture book, but the items seemed to be effective at least.

“Nooo, my power...it’s waning!” Ruquag Mire cried, staggering.

“Lienhard!” Princess Gertrude shouted at her hero. “Now, do it!”

“Raaaahh!” Lienhard grabbed up his sword once more and flung himself at the evil magician. Ruquag Mire raised his limp right hand to try to stop the attack, but he was already too late. The blade buried itself deep, deep inside his chest—wait, no, it didn’t. There was a noisy clang as it glanced off something beneath the robe.

Urgh! This still isn’t enough? Lienhard was on the cusp of giving up, but then...

“Gwaaaaaah!” Ruquag Mire let out an earsplitting cry as light poured from his body, flinging him directly toward the balcony. He slammed into the railing, let out a pathetic grunt, and tumbled over the edge.

This tower was three stories high, but that wasn’t enough to kill a mage like him. Convinced of that, Lienhard made his way to the balcony and peered over the edge. In that instant, an enormous explosion erupted from below. The wind from the blast caressed Lienhard’s cheeks, ruffling his hair.

“Whoa!” he gasped.

When the smoke cleared, Lienhard was greeted by an impact crater around the area where Ruquag Mire had most likely fallen. The trees around it had all been mowed down by the blast.

That was when Lienhard realized what must have happened. Although Ruquag Mire had armor beneath his robe, there must also have been a central core there that Lienhard had damaged during his attack. That had caused the magician’s mana to go out of control, popping him like one might a balloon.

What mattered was that he’d won. Lienhard was the victor.

“Lienhard!” the princess cried.

“Princess! Are you all right?” He rushed over toward her, cradling her in his arms.

“Lienhard, oh, Lienhard! I just knew you would come to save me!”

“Your Highness... I am fully aware of how shameful it is for me to have romantic feelings for someone as noble as you, but I...I just...”

She shook her head. “No, that’s not true at all. Because you see, Lienhard, I...I love you as well.”

“Princess... I am so undeserving of those words! But come, let’s hurry back to the castle!”

“Agreed!”

And with that, the great, evil magician Ruquag Mire met his grim end. Lienhard was welcomed back to his home country and hailed as a hero, earning himself a high rank among the nobility. The king even permitted his relationship with the princess. The two would eventually marry and live happily ever after.

The end.

Rudeus

“**M**_{AN}, that was draining.”

My assignment this time was to make sure the young knight Lienhard got with Gertrude, the princess of a tiny country. One of their grandchildren would apparently come in useful for Orsted. Ordinarily, their relationship would not be allowed by virtue of the difference in their status despite their love being mutual. The king knew of their reciprocal affections and tried to

encourage the two, but social standing prevented him from openly arranging a union between them. Instead, the king hoped that Lienhard might distinguish himself in battle, so he could use his valor as an excuse to seal the deal. The issue was that Lienhard was a coward at heart, so he typically squandered every opportunity that cropped up.

Left with no other choice, and desperate for the boy to make some kind of name for himself, the king decided to deploy him to the front lines during a war with a neighboring country. Lienhard would (unsurprisingly) perish in battle. Princess Gertrude would then be forced into a political marriage as nothing more than a pawn to barter for peace.

These events would, in later years, be transformed into a song which recounted the angry king who sent a shameless young knight in love with the princess into the frontlines of battle, where he inevitably lost his life. As they say, no child knows how dear they really are to their parents.

Anyway, my job was to subvert the fate that awaited them and make it so Lienhard and Gertrude really did end up together. I started by contacting the country's king. I proposed a plan to kidnap the princess and keep her hostage in a tower surrounded by a forest on the outskirts of the kingdom. Then, the king only had to send Lienhard in to save her. The king was skeptical at first, but I managed to convince him by invoking Ariel's name. And thus, masquerading as the great, evil magician Ruquag Mire, I kidnapped the princess.

Incidentally, the tower I imprisoned her in was handmade by yours truly. It was something I slapped together which would certainly collapse if an earthquake hit, but was fit enough to serve its intended purpose.

Before Lienhard set out for the tower, I disguised myself as a fortune-teller and gave him a hint about how to beat Ruquag Mire.

This was a ‘two birds with one stone’ sort of deal, since I took the opportunity to hand out my Superd figure and book while I was at it. Then I hurried back to the tower before he arrived. All that was left was to wait for him to brazenly barge in and engage me in battle. After a long, grueling battle, I would let him defeat me.

It was much easier said than done. In truth, it was a thankless, backbreaking job to take care of everything by myself—from negotiations and preparations to the actual enacting of the plan itself. In hindsight, maybe it didn’t have to be so grandiose, but hey! Things worked out in the end.

“I’m seriously pooped.”

Exhaustion aside, my mission was successful. I began dragging myself back home, where Orsted’s praise and gratitude would surely await. Getting back to Sharia would take about a month.

Perhaps it would be best to have Sylphie help relieve my fatigue. Seeing such a young invigorating couple made me desperate to see Sylphie’s embarrassed expression again. I wanted to enjoy a passionate night, you know? Unleash the carnal beast inside and...

Well, the truth was that Sylphie had grown kind of used to my antics so she didn’t act all that embarrassed anymore. The last time I peeked at her while she was changing, she just said, “Hey, Rudy, could you hand me those pants over there?” Apparently I needed to up the ante to make her blush. But even if I made a kinky request, she might just casually respond, “Oh, Rudy, you pervert.”

Regardless, I made it back home, where things were much like I remembered. Byt opened the door for me, and Lucie ran from me. I stopped to caress Eris’s tummy, groped Sylphie’s butt, patted Lara on the head, and licked Sylphie’s ear. Then Leo licked my hand, and Lucie ran from me again...

It brought such relief to be surrounded by family like this. When I lived in Japan, my father would return from business trips looking ragged but somehow at peace. Perhaps this was how he'd felt.

Since Norn was supposed to come back home today, I figured I'd lounge on the living room couch and relax while waiting for her and Roxy. As I sank into the cushions, a realization hit me.

"Huh? I don't see Aisha anywhere. Is she out shopping?"

The moment I asked, Lilia's expression shifted, eyes narrowed and lips pursed. Sylphie also pulled a face, looking troubled. Eris, however, looked the same as ever. An uncomfortable mood hung in the air. *Oh boy, what could be the cause of this?* I wondered.

"You see," Lilia started, looking apologetic, "Aisha has been out of the house a lot lately..."

Out of the house... Oh, right. I almost forgot. I asked her to do a job for me, didn't I?

"You mean she's doing the work I entrusted her with, right?" I asked.

"I'm not so certain about that. She's increasingly associating herself with some awful, questionable characters. I don't see how that can be entirely work-related."

Questionable characters, huh? The first image that popped in my mind was a bunch of guys with mohawk haircuts and shoulder pads. The type who'd drive extremely fuel-inefficient motorbikes despite the environmental effects, all the while cackling, "Gyahaha!" Whoever they really were, I could only guess they were people that Linia had recruited.

"Um, you see, Rudy," Sylphie said, "there have been some really strange-looking people showing up in the city lately. They're dressed in all black, and it seems like Aisha has been with them a lot."

It had only been a month since I entrusted that work to Aisha and Linia. It was difficult for me to believe they'd managed to draw in enough people you could regularly spot them on the streets.

Wearing all black, huh? Hm... Aisha was already fourteen. She was going through puberty, which meant she was in that rebellious, edgy phase. Teens her age often lashed out against family and acted too big for their britches. Perhaps it was because I forced her to interact more with the outside world that she got swept up with a bad crowd like that.

"My deepest apologies, Lord Rudeus," said Lilia. "I never dreamed Aisha would do something like this. She will be home later tonight, and I will be sure to scold her for it then."

Oh. So she wasn't coming back in the wee hours of the morning then? That was a relief at least.

As I thought that, Sylphie blurted out something strange. "You know, Aisha said she had your permission to do all of this."

I stared at her. Aisha said she had my permission? Suddenly, the worst possible scene imaginable popped up in my mind. I pictured Linia's recruits gathered in a warehouse, vulgar grins on their faces as they licked their lips. Who did these nasty thugs have their gazes pinned on? None other than the beautiful Linia and Aisha. Crammed in that small warehouse, the thugs would no doubt circle the girls and...well, I could only imagine.

Sure, Linia was a pretty decent fighter, but only against average opponents. She might be overwhelmed in a scenario where they were outnumbered. As for Aisha, I'd long thought of her as a child, but her body had begun rapidly developing lately. Her chest would be the same size as her mother's in no time. Plus, even as her brother, I had to admit she was cute. Her face was as charming as Paul's, enhanced by the canines that showed when she grinned.

Crap. I really screwed up. Linia and Aisha were both beautiful, yet I was thoughtless enough to ask them to assemble a group of shady people. I basically threw fresh meat into an ocean full of sharks! Although—just so we’re clear—I didn’t specifically ask them to gather a bunch of thugs!

“Eris... Eris, you didn’t stop her?” I asked, feeling a lump in my throat.

“...Huh? What for?” Eris tilted her head.

Ah, right. Perhaps Eris has no interest in Aisha at all.

“Those were all small fries anyway.”

Or not. This was Eris we were talking about. To her, there was no real difference between a kitten and a lion. Even if these guys were suspicious enough to worry Lilia and Sylphie, they were little more than mild delinquents as far as Eris was concerned.

No, I shouldn’t be relying on Eris anyway. She’s pregnant right now. Plus, I was the one who started all of this. I need to be the one to handle it.

“All right,” I said after giving it some thought. “I’ll go take care of it.”

I had no intention of dictating who Aisha could and couldn’t hang out with. Sometimes, the people society deemed unsavory weren’t that bad once you got to talking with them. There were still boundaries, though. Aisha wasn’t an adult yet. If these guys were trying to make use of her with little regard for the consequences, then I, her older brother, would shoulder the burden of stepping in to save her. No doubt Paul would do the same.

Actually, Paul would probably be classified as a shady character himself.

“Do you know where their hangout is?” I asked.

“I can lead you there,” Eris said, without missing a beat. But she was pregnant. Should I really let her come with me? She’d probably

try to jump in and fight if things took a violent turn. I couldn't risk that.

"I'm going too," said Sylphie.

As much as I appreciated the sentiment, I shook my head. "No. I'm going to go alone."

I'd been picturing the worst-case scenario in my mind, but who knew if anything fishy was indeed afoot? With that as my justification, I headed out to see this hangout Aisha had been frequenting. I'd hardly had time to breathe since getting home from my latest assignment, but there was no use complaining about that.

Sylphie tipped me off about their location: the third block of the adventurers' district. The two-story building, constructed of magic-resistant brick, was far removed from the main thoroughfare. An impressive abode that somewhat resembled an Adventurers' Guild or a pub. The door looked too new to be the original and was painted an inky black with the emblem of a ferocious tiger in the middle.

As I moved toward the door, a group of men exited who were clad entirely in black. They wore identical coats with that tiger emblem emblazoned on the back. For reasons I could only guess, they were all carrying hoes and sickles.

"Kay boys, here we go! Whoo!"

"Yeaaaah!"

They pumped each other up as they walked past me, heading for the main road.

That was unsettling. They were like a bunch of crazed sports fans heading out to cheer at a baseball game. No doubt they'd been convinced tigers were more powerful than any lion and were headed

out to brawl with some lions as combat practice. *Now that's just plain terrifying. Am I gonna be okay?*

Thanks to Orsted's training, I had become even stronger. I'd even stopped by the office to equip my magic armor for this occasion, just in case. I would be fine, surely. No way was I gonna lose to a couple of low-ranking thugs. And anyway, I couldn't back down simply because they were scary. My adorable little sister Aisha was hanging around these ruffians. No matter how clever she was, she would be powerless in a fight. At least they let her go home at night, but there was no telling what they'd been doing to her during the day. I had to save her, no matter how many enemies came at me.

This would all work out. I already knew what tactics I should use when faced with overwhelming numbers. Land three punches, then spin around for a second and throw one fist at the air, and turn back and punch three more times. Just like in Final Fight—interrupting the combo so you could start it from the beginning and knock out your opponent. That'd be enough to take them out.

"P-pardon the intrusion..." I nudged the door open and stepped inside.

Something akin to a lobby spread out before me: a wide space dotted with barrels at certain intervals. Why barrels? Because they were serving as makeshift tables. There were several people sitting around them with liquor bottles in hand, merrily chugging away. Exactly like a pub. One thing set it apart, however: each person here had the same black coat with the tiger emblazoned on the back.

Oh crap. Now I'm shaking in my boots.

"You got some business here?" One of them—a beastman with the face of a lion—noticed me and strolled over. He was taller than me, and bulkier. His coat barely fit over what was bound to be some impressive musculature. Unfortunately for him, bulk didn't correlate

to fighting capability. Neither Orsted nor Ruijerd looked like ripped macho types, but they were ridiculously powerful all the same.

“Um, well, you see...” I mumbled. “My sister. I came to see her. Could you perhaps tell me if she’s here?”

It was important to be well-mannered. Even if my power dwarfed this guy completely, there was still protocol to be followed. Part of the secret to my success in making it in this world was being polite to everyone I met for the first time. It most certainly was not because I was intimidated. No, sir.

“Your sister, huh?” Suspicious, the man scrutinized me for a moment before scanning the lobby.

Now that I had calmed down a bit and could look around, I noticed that there were a large number of women, even among those dressed in all black. They didn’t necessarily look shady, but they all looked like warriors with a past. If nothing else, they’d lived far tougher lives than the students attending the University of Magic. I guess that made them somewhat shady. Even so, Aisha was not among them.

“Scuse me for a sec,” said the man as he leaned toward me.

What? You want a piece of me, huh? Who do you think you are? J-just so you know, I’m good friends with Orsted! I tensed up, ready for this to get ugly, but the guy just sniffed the air around me. Apparently he was checking my smell. *That’s kinda embarrassing.* I tilted my head, confused.

Midway through, his brow furrowed. He froze and studied my face for a moment, then retreated a couple of steps.

Crap. Do I really stink that badly? I guess I did barely get home, so I haven’t had a chance to hop in the bath yet.

“Sorry, but uh, are you...Miss Aisha’s brother?” he asked. Apparently he was able to figure that out from the sweaty stench of my unwashed body.

“Um, yes, that’s correct. My name is Rudeus Greyrat. Is my...I mean, is Aisha present?”

Of course. It was important to do introductions. The first step of proper communication was giving your name and letting the other person know who you were affiliated with. I was quite famous around the city, so introducing myself was a good way of discouraging people from doing anything unsavory.

Noise suddenly erupted around me. The moment I spoke my name, the atmosphere in the room changed. Every person in the vicinity who’d heard my voice suddenly turned their gaze toward me.

“Greyrat, he said.”

“So that guy there is...”

“I knew I’d eventually see him for myself one day, but to think today would be that day...”

I felt very, *very* out of my element. *This can’t be good.* There was something familiar about this. As I recalled, Eris had once gone berserk in the past, and I had to go apologize to the group she beat up—a group like this one. The atmosphere right now felt the same.

Perhaps Eris had already roughed these guys up? *Wait, that’d be strange.* In that case, why hadn’t Aisha come back to us? Maybe Aisha had talked Eris down? *Okay, but hold up. Then that would mean she’s here of her own volition, right?* Impossible. These guys had to be threatening her.

Ugh. Maybe I shouldn’t have given them my real name. It might have been better to give them my alias, Ruquag Mire instead. It was too late for regrets, though.

“...that means you’re the chairman!”

“He’s our chairman!”

“Chairman Rudeus!”

For some reason, all the people in the room started bowing. No normal bow, mind you; they all stood at attention and did the forty-five-degree bow, as was proper Japanese etiquette. What made it more odd was that they all did it in unison.

“Uh?” I blinked slowly. *What the heck is going on here?*

The man in front of me had bent low enough for me to see the top of his head. “My deepest apologies for not recognizing you right away, Chairman,” he said.

“Sorry?” I blurted.

“The advisor is this way. I’ll guide you there.”

“Advisor? Uh, all right then.” I was having trouble keeping up with the course of this conversation.

The man straightened his shoulders, tail fully erect as he motioned me deeper into the building. I may not have understood what he was talking about, but if he was willing to show me the way, the least I could do was physically follow him. We climbed to the next floor, where he led me to one of the innermost rooms and said, “Through there.”

It was fairly dark inside, and a portrait of a mysterious yet handsome man hung on the wall gave the place an eerie vibe. It was within this room where I found them—the shadiest people in the entire city. They wore the same black coats as the group I’d seen on the first floor, and despite it being nearly summer, they were sporting what resembled white mufflers around their necks. Even though the room was completely sealed and barely lit, they wore sunglasses. The pair sat opposite one another, grinning devilishly as they counted gold coins together.

“Mewhahaha! It really was a good call to buy these sunglasses after all. The gleam of these gold coins would’ve blinded me otherwise, mew!”

One of the two cackled, wearing an unpleasant grin on her face. Perhaps it was the lack of illumination in the room, but her teeth seemed to glimmer like gold as well. The sunglasses made it impossible to make out her face, but I didn't have to see it to know the money had gone to her head. Her eyes were probably dollar signs right now. As far as I was concerned, she already was blinded.

"Ah, almost forgot. Here's the fees for this month, mew."

"Very good." The young girl beside her, also wearing glasses, nodded. She sat primly in her chair, arrogantly leaning back as if she were the boss of some big enterprise. She kept her chin held high as the other woman nudged over the pile of golden coins. There had to be at least ten of them.

From what I could tell, the coins weren't Asuran gold coins but the type used here in Ranoa Kingdom.

The younger girl perfunctorily counted the money she'd been handed and tossed them into an empty coin bag lying nearby. She quickly jotted down the amount tendered and signed her name before passing the receipt over to the cat-eared woman.

"There, payment received," she said.

"Yup, mew!"

"And?" The younger girl jerked her chin at the cat-eared woman, prompting her for more.

"Mewhahaha! And this is the consulting fee, mew." The cat-eared woman passed over one of the many mini-towers of golden coins. There were probably about five or six coins per stack. "With this, I hope I can expect you to keep workin' with me-ow, yeah?"



“Why, of course. I intend to continue working with you for a loooong time to come.”

“Mewhahaha!” snickered the cat-eared woman. “You really are rotten to the core, aren’t ya?”

The younger girl’s lips pulled into a devious smile as she replied, “Hehehe, not nearly as rotten as you, Linia.” She dumped the money into a different coin bag before depositing it into the front of her dress, right in the valley between her breasts. “Oh!”

Finally, they noticed the young beastman and me standing at the entrance.

“Chairman Rudeus is here to see you, Chief Linia and Advisor Aisha.”

Yes, indeed. The two figures in sunglasses before me were, in fact, Linia and Aisha.

The girls welcomed me and motioned for me to sit, so I plopped myself down on a couch while they took their seats opposite of me.

“What is this? What is going on?”

I decided I’d better get a feel for the situation before talking about anything else. After all, I *did* order the two to assemble a group of people. I did not, however, rent out this building or tell them to make everyone dress in black. There were also way more people here than I imagined.

“Well, you see, Big Brother... We did as you told us to. We gathered people and did some business with them,” said Aisha.

I nodded. “Uh-huh. Give me details.”

Aisha gave me the lowdown. After I’d left on my assignment, Linia and Aisha immediately set about recruiting people. They mainly focused on students still attending the university, graduates, and people from the Adventurers’ Guild. Before they knew it, they had

thirty members. That's right, thirty out of nowhere. With that many people, the little warehouse I bought to serve as our office was far too cramped. Aisha quickly sold it off, then used her own personal connections to solicit sponsors and rent this building instead. As for the portrait in the room of the handsome man, that was actually me; Zanoba had painted it in my likeness. He'd glorified my looks so much that it didn't resemble me in the slightest, though.

"As you can imagine, there was no solidarity between our members since we cobbled the team together on the fly...not to mention how we didn't even have a concrete idea of how we were going to operate," Aisha said.

Since it took no time at all to pull people in, they had a long time to wait until I returned from my assignment. They would lose people if they didn't decide on a direction they wanted to go with the company. Aisha visited the Floating Fortress to consult Nanahoshi for that reason. She swiped the flute from my room—the one Perugius had given me in case I ever had need of him—and summoned Arumanfi to take her there. She then paid her respects to Perugius before seeing Nanahoshi and receiving some guidance.

I stared at her for a moment, lost for words. "Huh? You met Lord Perugius?"

"Yeah. He was a pretty cool guy."

That sure was a bold, and arguably dangerous, move to do without saying a word to me. Perugius could have ended her life in seconds if she'd pissed him off. Though...no. He was pretty magnanimous, after all, and way too level-headed to fly off the handle when dealing with someone as young as Aisha. Besides, if she innocently commented on how "cool" Perugius was, Sylvaril would probably give her favorable treatment.

"And so, you see..." Aisha continued.

Nanahoshi's suggestions were uniforms, and proper manners. By having everyone wear the same clothes, it heightened their sense of solidarity so they wouldn't jump ship so easily, even if they didn't have a clear direction. On top of that, teaching them military customs and courtesies would increase clients' trust.

Aisha took Nanahoshi's advice to heart and bought some cheap, overstocked clothes from one of her acquaintances' clothing stores. That's what resulted in the gloomy black coats. Even Aisha realized that pure black outfits would be a bad look, so she bought some overstock yellow fabric from the same store using her own pocket money, and then sewed rat emblems onto each coat.

Yes, rat emblems. She took inspiration from our Greyrat name. Since it was yellow on black, I thought for sure they were supposed to be tigers.

Phew, dodged a bullet there. Good thing I didn't tell her how cool I thought the tiger emblems were.

Once they were all in the same outfits, Aisha started teaching them proper manners, such as how to properly bow. The perfect forty-five-degree bow is what we call "ojigi" in Japanese. It was easy enough for anyone to pick up, and people would understand at a glance that the person was trying to be respectful.

Anyway, that was how it all came together—an organization of people wearing all black and bowing their heads super low.

With that out of the way, Aisha started to consider what they could make these new employees do. The majority of them were beastfolk that Linia had recruited. They didn't really have any talents outside of fighting. We're talking jock types addicted to bench-pressing, who couldn't even read numbers, let alone letters. There were some bright minds among them, but for every smart person there were at least five more who were meatheads.

The only idea that came to mind for a group like that was mercenary work, so that was what the girls decided to do. It also helped them to pick a name, which they derived from the very pseudonym I often employed: Ruquag's Mercenary Band.

There was one issue, however. Sharia was right in the middle of the Three Magic Nations, which were relatively peaceful places. There were no wars going on, and it would take too much time to deploy people to places that were embroiled in conflict. So Aisha devised the idea of a bodyguard business. For a set price, a person could hire several of our mercenaries for a period of time. One person would be appointed leader of the group, and they would call the shots during an assignment. If someone were to die or get injured on the job, the company would immediately send a replacement.

In other words, they were leasing out bodyguards. Definitely not a crime gang. Absolutely not.

"And once we opened a business, we immediately shot to fame."

With the Doldia Tribe's princess acting as the company's leader, it managed to earn a peculiar amount of trust from the people. On top of that, Aisha's advertising and the personal connections of individual members quickly made the group popular. Within fourteen to fifteen days of the band's founding, they were already receiving requests from big shots like the Ranoa Kingdom's Order of Knights, the Magicians' Guild, and the Magical Implement Workshop. Their membership was increasing in the meantime, which was why they currently had fifty or so people about the city.

Sharia had all sorts of people: knights, students, smiths, and workshop artisans, and so on. Factions naturally formed within this diversity, which resulted in a number of fights and minor spats. That

created the need for a niche industry—a neutral party that could protect those involved.

If we didn't watch our step, the mercenary band could become a faction of its own, but that was why Aisha thought it best to accept requests from anyone without discrimination, in order to maintain that neutrality.

"We have been setting aside some of what we earn as company fees, but even then we've still raked in way more than I ever imagined," said Aisha.

"You got that right, mew. Everyone pays us way more in fees than we even thought they would. They're honest people, the lot of 'em, mew."

So they made a bodyguard organization that's slightly different from the Adventurers' Guild. They'd also turned over a pretty decent profit in the process, making for a smooth start to our business. Of course, the total amount of revenue was nothing big; it would still take a very, very long time before Linia could repay all that she owed. But even so, if we expanded our business or changed our services after filling our coffers, she might be able to repay it pretty quickly. In fact, I didn't mind writing off the rest of what she owed once she'd returned at least half of it. I wasn't really after money anyway.

I pursed my lips.

Honestly, this was completely different from what I had pictured in my head. No, maybe that didn't matter. If things were going smoothly, then that was good enough. I never dreamed things would work out this well. I suspected Aisha's skillful touch was responsible for this venture's success. She was a genius, and if she hadn't been serious about doing this, it would have taken much longer for the business to get off the ground. I never thought she would be this dedicated.

"I didn't realize you loved money this much, Aisha," I said with a sigh.

"Hey, that's not it at all." Aisha's lips puckered in a pout, as if she was offended by the notion. "The only thing I love this much is you, Big Brother. You said this would be to my benefit, so I gave it a hundred and ten percent."

"Aisha..."

Her eyes glimmered as she looked at me. Gosh, she was so cute. If only she wasn't my sister, then I might be tempted.

"Also, it'd be a big pain if this cat came back to the house," Aisha added.

Ah, that's probably the real reason. I thought they seemed to be getting along so well, but I guess maybe I was mistaken, huh? Nah, that's one thing. This is another.

"Well, whatever the case, you did a good job," I said, patting her on the head.

Aisha broke out into a grin. "Ehehe, thank you!"

Circumstances aside, at least we'd found a way for Linia to start repaying her debt. There had to be some promising talents at the office too, considering how many they had gathered. Surely one of them would have a knack for trade. Maybe I could find someone to work at Orsted's company as well as someone to hire as our store clerk to help us sell Ruijerd figures.

I guess I shouldn't be surprised that they'd come this far in only a month, but that was Aisha for you. I might have underestimated just how capable she was.

"Still, Miss Lilia has been worried, so let's sit down and have a little talk at home," I suggested.

“Whaat?” Aisha frowned. “But Mother is so hardheaded. She won’t understand even if I explain it to her, and I want to keep doing this kind of work for a little while.”

“It’ll be okay. I’ll explain to her that I asked you to do this.”

I’d feel wrong forcing her to continue if she was unwilling, but strangely, Aisha was pumped to keep going. I’d let her if that was what she wanted. Plus, seeing how much she had accomplished here made me feel like it was a waste to simply keep her as a maid in the house.

“All right,” she said. “I trust you, Big Brother. You know, she’s really soft when it comes to you. So make sure you explain everything to her properly, okay?”

And with this, I had my own subordinates under the company name Ruquag’s Mercenary Band. I’d never had people working under me like this. I could use them for all kinds of things for me in the future. So many possibilities opened up before me.

“Oh yeah, Boss!”

Lost in my thoughts, I was just about ready to take Aisha home when Linia called out.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Got a letter recently from the Great Forest, mew.”

Huh. From the Great Forest? Written by Pursena, I assumed.

Linia passed it to me. I noticed it was addressed to her, and she’d already opened it and read the contents. There was no name to indicate who’d sent it, which made me wonder how she knew it came from the Great Forest. Perhaps the scent? Without wasting any time, I pulled out the letter tucked inside and glanced over the contents.

My breath caught in my throat.

The writer wasted no time with seasonal greetings or anything of the sort. Their message was simple and short, penned in the Beast Tongue: *Big trouble! The Sacred Beast has gone missing! Calling for an emergency search and rescue!*

“For his part, the Sacred Beast said to leave it and not worry about it, so it’s probably no big deal, mew.” Linia threaded her fingers behind her head and chuckled.

Silently, I resolved to visit the Great Forest. It’d probably be a good idea to take a gift along as well, as a form of apology.

Ruquag's Mercenary Band

CHAIRMAN: Rudeus Greyrat

ACTING CEO: Linia Dedoldia

ADVISOR AND VICE CHIEF: Aisha Greyrat

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES: Approximately fifty

BRAND: Part of the Orsted Corporation

CONSULTANT: Silent Sevenstar

Chapter 8: Revisiting the Doldia Village

I BROUGHT LINIA and the Sacred Beast Leo along on the trip to the Great Forest. Eris desperately wanted to come along as well, but I asked her to stay behind given how heavily pregnant she was. Her stress was probably mounting since she'd recently lost her toy (Linia). Taking her to a village filled with beastfolk in that state would only dare her to try and kidnap someone else to take home with us.

Meanwhile Linia whined, "I don't wanna go back. If I do, I'll just be forced to act as Pursena's minion." Unfortunately, I didn't think I could earn their trust if I went alone. I needed her help persuading them.

My bad—I should have written them a letter right after I summoned Leo here. I screwed that up for sure.

Anyway, even though beastfolk tended to be stubborn, I was a more mature person now. Things certainly wouldn't go as poorly as they did the last time. I would make sure to explain everything properly, and I'd have the Sacred Beast and Linia along for the trip.

I left Aisha in charge of our mercenary band. She wouldn't have problems since she handled most of the administrative work to begin with. The members mostly looked to Linia at the start, but they'd come to respect Aisha as well. Surely there'd be no issue with Linia leaving for a bit to take a business trip.

Honestly, this little journey did mean I was running behind on my work for Orsted. It was best to nip trouble in the bud before it got any bigger, though, so I wanted to get this out of the way first. If I didn't, I risked getting even more behind on my assignments. It would be a huge headache if a swarm of beastfolk charged into Sharia a year from now trying to get the Sacred Beast back.

When I explained things to Orsted and tried to impress the urgency of the situation upon him, he didn't seem particularly bothered by my request. He offered to watch over the house while I was gone, in fact. Thanks to my contributions, he'd laid far more groundwork against the Man-God during this loop than any other, so he didn't mind me getting a little sidetracked. If anything, we had some breathing room.

As much as I wanted to head straight for the office basement and hop on the teleportation circle to go straight to the Doldia Village, our circle in the Great Forest was actually located quite a distance away from them. Instead, I decided to pay a visit to Perugius. Knowing him, I figured he might be aware of some abandoned teleportation ruins closer to the northern part of the Great Forest.

When I visited, Perugius was leaning back in his chair as usual, surrounded by his ten familiars and Sylvaril. The missing eleventh familiar had been deployed to the Asuran palace to act as his representative.

"The Great Forest, you say?"

I tilted my head. "Is there a problem with that?"

"No. Do you plan to leave immediately?"

"The sooner the better, I figure."

His face clouded over for a split second when I informed him I would be going to the Great Forest, as if he were hesitating. He acquiesced almost immediately, though, and agreed to act as my taxi.

This man really is magnanimous, I thought.

“That said... The Sacred Beast, hm? That does bring back some unpleasant memories,” Perugius said. He glanced at Leo, brows drawn.

I wondered what was behind that reaction, but he probably was acquainted with the previous Sacred Beast, having lived as long as he had. I had no idea what their relationship was, but why was he still making that face, knowing the current incarnation before him was our house pet?

Leo didn't mind the way Perugius eyed him. He sat there looking poised. It was Linia who seemed petrified. Apparently she'd met Perugius once before when she came here with Aisha, but she still hadn't gotten used to being in his presence.

“I'm sorry my little sister imposed on you the other day,” I said to Perugius.

“Think nothing of it.” He waved his hand dismissively. “I like clever people like her.”

Seeing that he wasn't particularly disgruntled by her intrusion, I imagined Aisha must have handled her visit with him well.

“By the way,” said Perugius, “I hear you have had a daughter.”

“Yes. Did Aisha tell you?”

“Mmhm. How fortunate for you that you did not have a boy with green hair.” He spoke as if he was trying to suss me out.

“...Yeah. It is a great relief that my child wasn't Laplace reincarnated.”

Perugius broke out into a grin. “Oh? Judging by your reply, I suppose Orsted must have told you about our peoples' ability to reincarnate.”

“He did.”

“In that case, be sure you don’t forget this: when the day comes that Laplace reincarnates, I will kill him, regardless of if he happens to be your son.” His teeth showed as his smile spread.

That’s terrifying.

“Well, personally, I’d like to pray that never happens.”

Personally, I was split on the matter of Laplace. According to Orsted, he was the last of the dedicated warriors to have continued fighting the Man-God over a long period. That would make him an ally under normal circumstances, but he was defeated by the Man-God. The resulting split in his personality resulted in one half deceiving Ruijerd and becoming bitter enemies with Perugius. That made him my enemy. If such a man was then born as my son, I wouldn’t know what to do.

I wasn’t too worried, of course. Orsted implied he already knew exactly when, where, and under whose identity Laplace would reincarnate. My appearance may have altered the future, but since Laplace seemed to have a strong destiny of his own, I wanted to believe my presence wouldn’t greatly influence that.

“That said, I have no desire to cross blades with you,” said Perugius. “If anyone resembling Laplace is born into your family, you should consult me first.” He spoke as if trying to counsel me as he got up from his throne.

I had no idea what “consulting him” would involve, but judging from his tone, it didn’t seem like he’d let Laplace slip away at all. Perhaps agreeing not to kill him outright and without warning was Perugius’s way of showing mercy.

“Now then,” Perugius said, “I will begin preparations for your teleportation circle. Wait in your room for a bit.”

I decided to pay a visit to Nanahoshi while the teleportation circle was being prepared, but she wasn’t in her usual room. I

meandered through the halls wondering where she could have gone when I encountered Miss Yuzuru of Atonement, and asked her where Nanahoshi was. It turned out that at this time of the day she was busy learning about the practical application of teleportation circles. There was a lot of information to digest and remember, which had to be rough. I fully intended to pitch in to help in if she needed, but for the moment, I'd leave the potato chips and salted rice balls for her to find later. Some nostalgic food would be healing for the soul.

After that, I went to my assigned room and waited patiently. Linia's eyes lit up when she saw how opulent the rooms were. She wasted no time diving onto the plush couch.

"Haah," she sighed. "You being unfazed I get, but Aisha being fearless is another story, Boss. Can't believe she can act on equal footing with someone that terrifying, mew..." Linia stretched out her body as she grumbled.

I had no idea what Aisha had discussed with Perugius, but knowing her, everything must have gone well. Perugius seemed pretty chill about their encounter as well. My only worry was Aisha's occasional propensity to say what she was thinking even if it was insensitive or offensive.

Maybe I'd better take some preemptive measures to make sure she doesn't step on Perugius's toes.

"Linia, none of us are on equal footing with him," I said. "We're all beneath him. The only reason Aisha was forgiven for being so brazen is because Lord Perugius is a magnanimous man."

"Think so, mew? Sure he's not just terrified of that big bad Dragon God boss you got behind ya? I haven't met him myself, but he's pretty scary, right? Cliff was a trembling mess, mew."

"Hey, knock that off! That's not true at all!" I snapped.

You're the fearless one. Or maybe reckless is the better word.

Perugius could overhear every word of our conversation. This was the equivalent of squeezing water from a dirty dishrag into someone's tea before serving it. Honestly! I couldn't believe the nerve of her.

Not long after that conversation, a grumpy Sylvaril showed up. As I suspected, she'd overheard us. "Lord Perugius *is* a magnanimous man, and he thinks of you as a close friend," she said with added emphasis, as if to put me in my place.

There no was no need for that; I wasn't getting ahead of myself. And I'd prefer it if she didn't take what this idiot cat said seriously. Besides, it was a great honor being considered a friend by someone as awe-inspiring as Lord Perugius. I said as much to Sylvaril, trying to butter her up, but my attempt was apparently a little overdone because it did nothing to soften her bad mood. "Preparations are complete, so please come this way," she said irritably as she ushered us out of the room.

Sylvaril guided us to the basement of the fortress: it was the same dark, dank maze we'd descended into on our trip to the Demon Continent. In one of the dimly lit rooms we found Perugius and Nanahoshi standing side-by-side. Before them was, unsurprisingly, a teleportation circle. It wasn't emitting any light; they must not have activated it yet.

As I waited, wondering what the holdup could be, Nanahoshi took a deep breath, holding a magic crystal in her hands.

"You're only putting into practice what you already know. No need to feel nervous," said Perugius.

"Right..." Nanahoshi stepped closer to the circle. "Rudeus, go ahead and get on it. I apologize in advance if I mess something up." Her face was tense with anxiety as she motioned us toward the circle.

From the look of things, she was going to be the one to activate the circle this time. So we were going to be her guinea pigs, huh? I shouldn't complain: I was the one who came and asked for a favor out of the blue.

"Sylvaril," said Perugius. "Did you hand them the map?"

"Oh, pardon me. I nearly forgot." Sylvaril fished a map out of her pocket and handed it over.

I opened it and studied it. The Doldia Village was near the edge of the paper, so I could only assume we'd be teleporting to the ruins in the middle. It looked like the village was half a day's travel away. Perhaps it was because the whole place was covered in forest, but the two locations looked fairly close by. I decided to show Linia and see what she had to say.

"Ah, I know where this is, mew. Don't worry, it's pretty close, mew."

Then surely everything would be fine. It had been close to a decade since Linia had last been home, but since it was her birthplace, it was probably best to leave navigation to her.

As for you, Miss Sylvaril, I bet you had no intention of handing us that map unless Lord Perugius said something first. Such wicked behavior is very unbecoming, you know. I'll tattletale on you to Lord Perugius!

"Now, let's get started," said Perugius.

"All right." Nanahoshi knelt and drew the magic crystal close to the circle. With a brush in hand, she began drawing something on the ground.

"Just to be on the safe side, we're only going to activate the circle for a moment. Once you're over there, you'll need to figure things out yourself," said Perugius. "Understood?"

I blinked at him, confused. "Yes... Understood."

Since they were still busy setting everything up, my mind didn't really register the words as I gave a perfunctory reply. I only started to contemplate the meaning of what he said after that. Would there be a lot of beasts awaiting us? No, wait. Considering the time of year, perhaps...

"Hey, about what you said—" Linia blurted, having realized the implication at the same moment I did.

Alas, Nanahoshi had already finished her preparations. Once she'd drawn the circle with her brush, she put her magic crystal on top of it. The circle began to faintly glow afterward, and we found ourselves sucked in.

"Urk!"

The next thing I knew, I was surrounded by water that rose all the way to my stomach. Below it, I spotted the magic circle that had brought us here. The light it had emitted soon disappeared.

"Meeeew! I knew it, it's the rainy season!" Linia squeaked, cradling Leo in her arms. Despite essentially being a dog, he held his head high as if he thought it was only natural for her to carry him, even though he was already completely soaked. To make matters worse, our luggage was waterlogged too.

Oh, great. That means my apology gift is probably sopping wet.

The water was freezing. If we didn't hurry out of here and find a place to dry off, we risked catching a cold.

Not that a cold really matters. A little detoxification magic will fix that right up.

Those thoughts knocked around in my head as I began the search for some stairs, but I saw nothing that would help us to climb out of here. That left me with only one option. I called forth a lamplight spirit to aid me, and finally, located a stairway...that led downwards. This was apparently the top floor of this building.

“Boss, you gotta do something, mew!”

“Hold your horses,” I barked back.

Right now, we needed to go up. If the water level was this high, there shouldn’t be water above us. With that in mind, I used my earth magic to create a step along the wall. I perched on it and reached to the ceiling.

“Hmph!” I grunted, using my magic to open a hole above me.

I climbed outside only to find a heavy downpour and enormous trees lined up to the horizon. The canopy above obscured my view of the sky completely. Meanwhile, the ground below was being washed away by a raging flood. I might even be forgiven for thinking it was a river rather than a forest, but that was all the proof we needed to know we’d made it to our destination. There was no mistake about it. This was definitely the Great Forest.

As I expected, the spot where I stood was at the very top of the ruins we’d teleported into, and the entire place was flooded.

“This is real bad, mew. What’re we gonna do? This isn’t how I imagined this going, mew.”

Linia and Leo had also climbed up onto the roof with me.

“I can either freeze the water so we can walk across it, or I can make a boat and use magic to propel us.”

Her eyes lit up. “Ooh, Boss! I knew you had it in ya, mew!”

“But with the rain like this, I have no idea what direction we should even head in,” I confessed.

Linia nodded. "Yeah, with such bad weather, I'm as lost as you, mew."

So I figured. This was no normal flood; the water had risen all the way to the very top of these ruins. It was probably about five meters high. Anything that might have normally acted as a landmark wouldn't be visible right now.

"S-so what should we do, mew?" Linia asked.

"Should we wait for the rainy season to end?"

"When it does end, that'll be mating season, mew. If that happens, I'll end up being someone's plaything, mew."

Ah, right. Mating season. It was one thing to resist her when we were at home, but I wasn't sure I could hold myself back on a trip like this. Perhaps it would be better to get going then. Or would it be better to go back and see if Orsted had some kind of item to help us along?

"Woof!" Leo barked, puffing out his chest as he looked up at me.

What's with him?

"Ya mean it, mew?!" Linia hopped in, responding for me.

"Woof!"

"You aren't the Sacred Beast for nothing, that's for sure, mew!"

I was a genius to bring Linia along, considering she could understand him. Had to have someone bow-lingual to communicate with this dog. "What's he saying, Linia?"

"He knows the way, so he said to make a boat, mew."

"All right, roger that."

Linia was right; Leo's title wasn't meaningless. He was very capable.

With that decided, I used my earth magic to conjure a boat. The issue with my earth-crafting was that the more mana I concentrated into it, the heavier whatever I was trying to make became. However, by decreasing the intensity of mana that I used, I could also make something lighter. To construct a proper boat, I would need to use a honeycomb pattern and maintain mana density while shaping, making sure the center could contain air and give it buoyancy.

It took a little more than an hour to complete the project. The end product was a misshapen square raft.

Ah well, it floats, and its propulsion is entirely based on my own magic. This should suit us just fine.

“All right! Shall we be off?”

Linia looked uneasy. “You sure this is gonna be okay, mew? Boss, did you run outta mana or something? I sure hope we don’t sink halfway there, mew...”

“If it starts going under, we’ll stop midway and climb one of the trees and rest on the branches for a while,” I said as I climbed aboard the raft. It lacked stability, but I could simply patch it up along the way.

“Urgh, I’m really not so sure about this, mew...” Linia frowned.

“Woof!”

Linia’s head shot up. “Oh, Boss, he says to go that way, mew.”

“Got it. Well then, off we go.”

I used my mana to control the surrounding waters, pushing us forward in the direction Leo indicated.

Two days later, we arrived at the Doldia Village. It wasn’t that far from the ruins, distance-wise, but we were accosted by monsters along the way and got pushed off course by the currents, so we got a little lost. If we hadn’t been lucky enough to drift onto the Holy

Sword Highway, it might have taken another ten days for us to find our way.

“Hey, look!”

“It’s the Sacred Beast!”

“Someone, report this to Lord Gyes!”

The whole village erupted into a great fuss upon spotting us. Warriors came rushing out, almost like bees swarming out of a hive, and they were all fully decked out.

“It’s a human male.”

“Don’t tell me he’s the one who kidnapped the Sacred Beast...?”

“Come to think of it, there *was* an incident just like this ten years ago.”

As our raft drew closer, the beastfolk grew even more wary. The atmosphere was so tense that it seemed likely they might clap us in irons without any room for discussion.

Oh boy, now what? They might capture me, strip me, and throw me in a cell again.

Just as I was beginning to grow worried, Linia stood up.

“Everyone! I, Linia Dedoldia, daughter of Gyes Dedoldia, have made my return, mew!” she declared.

“Huh?”

The warriors froze, scrutinizing her face before they all began sniffing the air in unison.

“It’s true. That’s really Linia.”

“She sure has grown.”

“Yeah, it’s been like twelve or thirteen years by now, right?”

The air grew thick with nostalgia. I felt relieved for a moment, but that was soon shattered.

“We already heard from Pursena, you know!”

“What was all that talk about you becoming a merchant, huh?!”

“You need to fulfill your duties here in the village!”

They immediately started heckling us.

“Argh, I knew it!” Linia cried. “Boss, get us out of here! I’m beggin’ ya, mew!”

I ignored her and propelled us the rest of the way to safe harbor.

Nothing about the village had changed since I’d last been here. They were just as isolationist—and hostile toward outsiders—as before. At least, I had Linia with me this time, and there were quite a few who remembered me.

I was last here ten years ago. Those who had been children at the time were now warriors, but they remembered who I was after catching a whiff of my scent. There were also those among their veterans who recalled who I was as well. For example, the man who threw water on me all those years ago. He’d had five kids over the past ten years and returned to his duties as one of their warriors. He sure was passionate about his job.

While everyone was somewhat welcoming toward me, they were quick to start bashing Linia.

“How dare you! You’re the chief’s daughter and you have the nerve to abandon your duties!”

“You’re a disgrace to our tribe!”

Linia hunched her shoulders and hid behind me. Tears welled in her eyes as she mumbled quietly, “This is exactly why I didn’t wanna come back here, mew.”

It was really her own fault things were like this.

The villagers continued disparaging Linia for a bit, at least until the Sacred Beast shook himself dry and drew their attention.

“That’s right! The Sacred Beast is far more important than Linia!”

“Yeah! He’s finally back with us!”

“Just where have you been all this time?”

Linia was forgotten as they focused completely on Leo. They kept asking where he’d been and how he got taken away in the first place. In the process, those present who weren’t familiar with me gradually grew suspicious, eyeing me like they thought I’d been the one responsible for kidnapping him.

This sure brought back memories. If someone blurted out, “Oh yeah, this is the pervert who fell in love with the Sacred Beast ten years ago, right?” I would be thrown into jail for sure.

While I was preoccupied with these musings, a loud voice boomed through the crowd.

“Everyone, quiet, mew!”

“Shut up, all of you!”

The two who came forward were female warriors—Minitona and Tersena. I recognized them. I had even saved them in the past. They acted as leaders, quieting the crowd as they strolled up to me.

“There’s no point in making a fuss here, mew!” Minitona declared.

“You can give us the details at the chief’s house,” said Tersena. “Everyone, make way!”

We were soon guided off to Gyes’s residence.

Gyes was now the chief of the tribe. The former chief, Gustav, had sustained a terrible injury fighting a monster during the rainy season a few years ago, which resulted in an early retirement. He had left Gyes in charge of the village and was living out the rest of his days peacefully in another settlement.

Perhaps that was why Gyes seemed more dignified now. He seemed much more laid-back. By the looks of things, the odds of me being framed for a crime I didn't commit were a lot lower this time.

Relieved, I handed over the package of smoked meat I had bought in Sharia and brought as an offering. Then I started explaining the situation. I told them I was facing a powerful enemy, and I didn't want to be constantly anxious about my family's safety while opposing them. That was why I tried summoning someone or something to protect them, which resulted in the Sacred Beast appearing. He had thus become our Guardian Beast.

Once I was finished, Gyes's expression turned bitter. "That's all a bit difficult to believe."

I didn't doubt that. I myself was shocked when Leo appeared. Although I had been even more shocked at who appeared before Leo, the first time I did it.

"Woof, woof!" Leo barked from his spot beside me, sitting all prim and proper.

"See? He's backing up my story," I said. I didn't actually have a clue what he was saying, but I assumed he was voicing his support for my version of events.

"The only thing he mentioned was that the food in your house is supposedly delicious," Gyes informed me.

"Sorry?" I gaped.

"I jest. He said, 'I am there to be at his daughter's side, to do what must be done.'" Gyes sighed.

That was a joke? Gyes, you rascal. You can actually tell jokes now, huh?

Anyway, so Leo was interested in my daughter, huh? Lucie? Nah, probably Lara. He was really attached to her, after all. From

what I had seen, he was almost always glued to her baby bed. Orsted had even agreed that Lara had special promise.

“Woof!”

“Hm? Destiny, you say?”

Gyes and Leo faced each other, seemingly engrossed in conversation. Alas, I had no idea what it was about because I didn’t speak Woofenese.

“Linia, can you interpret for me?” I asked.

“Hm? Oh sure, mew.”

Her interpretation let me listen in on their conversation.

“True, there is a legend that one hundred years after the Sacred Beast is born, a messiah will appear to save the world, and the Sacred Beast will supposedly aid them on their quest,” Gyes said thoughtfully.

“Woof!” (Linia’s translation: “Tell me! What do you think the Doldia Tribe’s duty is, mew?”)

“Our duty is to protect the Sacred Beast until the savior appears.”

“Woof, woof!” (Linia’s translation: “And I, the great and majestic Sacred Beast, have found that savior, mew! This man’s daughter is our savior!”)

“I don’t doubt that you’re telling the truth. However, this is unprecedented—for the savior’s father to summon the Sacred Beast directly and have him protect her from infancy...”

Through Linia’s interpretation, Leo made a point of emphasizing his importance as he spoke. That level of arrogance reminded me of a certain buff Demon King I had met in the past.

Anyway, so my daughter was the savior, huh? Our little baby Lara with that impudent-looking face? Orsted had hinted something

along those lines, but nothing concrete. Huh. It felt very surreal, somehow.

Maybe I should start teaching her kung fu while she's young. You know, passing along my fatherly knowledge.

"Woof, woof. Woof woof, woof!" (Linia's translation: "The legend also talks about a possibility of the savior dying early! Tell me, do you recall what that entails?!")

After a brief pause, Gyes answered, "According to the legend, if the savior dies, the Sacred Tree will wither. The Sacred Beast will also grow weaker and weaker until death takes him."

"Grrrr!" (Linia's translation: "Someone is after my master's life! Is it your desire to snuff mine out as well?!")

Gyes shook his head. "No, that is absolutely not what we want."

"Arf!" (Linia's translation: "In that case, there should be no issue here!")

Again, Gyes's expression soured. He glared at Linia, who had been animatedly interpreting the conversation for me the entire time. Linia withered under his gaze and hid behind me.

This is why you gotta quit joking around. Yeah, I'm the one who asked you to interpret, but you're the one who took weird creative liberties and pissed him off. You goofed, so you need to deal with the consequences.

"Linia," Gyes said suddenly. "Is everything he's saying true?"

"Y-yes, it is, sir. He's there to protect Boss's—uh, I mean—Lord Rudeus's child, mew."

It was rare for her to speak so politely. Apparently even Sharia's arrogant delinquent was terrified of her father.

"A human girl, hm?" Gyes paused. "It's only been twenty years since the Sacred Beast was born, so I was under the impression it would be another eighty years until he fulfilled his duty."

“Technically, the girl is half-human and half-demon,” Linia corrected. “So I think she’ll have a long life, mew.”

“Aha, I see. I didn’t account for the possibility she might be a demon...” Gyes crossed his arms over his chest, lost in thought.

In the decade since I’d last seen him, he looked far more introspective than he once had. He was more the thoughtless type before, more likely to rush in headlong than to pause and consider his options. He seemed to have mellowed out a lot, much like the previous chief, Gustav. Perhaps there was something about maturing past thirty that helped soften beastfolk.

Would the same be true for Linia? Nah, I was sure she’d be the same until the day she died.

The two young women standing behind Gyes chimed in, “There’s no way a demon could be the savior, mew!”

“Yeah! And he said he called the Sacred Beast to him with summoning magic. I’ll bet he used some weird sorcery to trick the Sacred Beast!”

Minitona and Tersuna sounded just like Gyes had in his younger days. *Weird. I was pretty sure in the past they were grateful to me for my help. I guess being around the other beastfolk for so long colored their view, huh?*

Their shift in attitude aside, they kind of had a point; I did use a magic circle devised by Perugius to summon Leo. The circle had conditions placed on it to make whoever was summoned from it completely obedient to me. Perhaps that had an impact on Leo, and his belief that my daughter was the savior was only a delusion.

“No, the chances of that are slim,” said Gyes. “If that were the case, Lord Rudeus would not come all the way to our village like this. He lives on the other side of the world. It would have been hard for us to track him down and do something about him. So he would have ignored the situation if he was planning anything underhanded.”

"I-I guess so..."

Uh, yeah, about that... I should apologize. I actually did try to ignore it. Sorry about that.

"Well, that should be enough regarding the matter of the Sacred Beast," Gyes said.

"Are you sure that's wise?"

"He has spoken. Our job now is simply to obey."

"Woof!" Leo barked, as if agreeing, then promptly placed his head on my lap.

I instinctively stroked his head, and his expression turned to one of contentment. Minitona and Tersena looked entirely displeased, as if they found my actions impudent, but I ignored them. Back home we did this all the time.

Still, I was surprised that they accepted what Leo had to say so readily. I guess Linia was right in the end. *In fact, I seem to recall Ghislaine saying something similar too.*

"That said, Lord Rudeus... Let's see... yes, about fifteen years from now. When your child has matured, please bring her here. I would like to follow custom and conduct the Sacred Tree ceremony. I am sure it will be a difficult trek given that it takes about a year to travel from where you live, but I would still ask it of you. This is a part of our duty."

"Very well then."

A ceremony, huh? I had no idea what that entailed exactly, but I assumed it was some kind of formality. *So we're going to celebrate Lara reaching adulthood in fifteen years from now here in the Doldia Village, huh? I'll have to write that down in my diary so I don't forget.*

At least that took care of the situation with Leo, and much more smoothly than I thought it would. I let out a breath. I wasn't the only one relieved; I noticed the tension leave Gyes's shoulders as well. The whole room seemed more relaxed.

Gyes glanced over at Linia, who immediately flinched. “Now tell me, why is our brazen little alley cat, Linia, staying with Lord Rudeus, hm?”

“Oh,” I said. “About that, actually. You see, she tried to get into the trade business, but she ended up racking up a huge de—”

“So glad you asked, mew!” Linia interrupted, suddenly pushing herself in front of me so she could explain for herself. “You see, I thought about throwing my hat in and trying out the trading business after I split with Pursena, but then one day, I received a divine revelation from the heavens, mew. I followed their advice and returned to the Magic City of Sharia. And would you believe who I found there? None other than the Sacred Beast himself! This is it, I thought to myself, the purr-pose for which I was led here—to look after the Sacred Beast and all his needs! So really, I haven’t forgotten the duty our tribe’s been tasked with. In fact, the whole reason I didn’t come back was because, as one of our warriors, I was trying to fulfill my role, mew!”

Wow. It sure was impressive how she could pull so many lies out of thin air like that. Or perhaps she’d been contemplating what excuses to feed her father in advance?

Gyes eyed her skeptically, but Minitona and Tersena looked completely convinced. They had regarded her disdainfully moments before, but now they gazed at her with something bordering on reverence.

These guys really are simple-minded.

Although I had read in a manga somewhere that once people stop looking down on others and start to respect people, it facilitates their own growth. It made sense; finding something good in an otherwise hopeless person reflected on one’s maturity.

But still, lying wasn’t great.

“Pardon, Mister Gyes,” I cut in. “Actually, she tried her hands at the whole trading business and racked up a bunch of debt. That’s how she ended up being turned into a slave, and I stepped in to save her. Well, really, I just shouldered her debt for her.”

“Interesting,” he said.

“Meeew! Boss, you’re not supposed to tell them the truth!” Linia screeched at me.

Minitona and Tersena were back to giving her dirty looks.

“She’s currently working at my place to return the money she owes,” I explained.

“So what you mean, Lord Rudeus, is that she is currently your slave. Correct?”

Urk. Now that I think about it, she is Gyes’s daughter. I can only imagine how he feels as a father, hearing that his child has been turned into a slave. If it were me and I heard Lucie was a slave, I’d kill whoever owned her and set her free, no questions asked.

Regardless, I couldn’t bring myself to lie.

“Effectively, I guess you could say that,” I admitted reluctantly. “But to be clear, I am most certainly not treating her like a slave. I’m just helping her get back on her feet, as a friend.”

Gyes shook his head. “I don’t care whatever the circumstances are. She is the one who abandoned her duties for her ambition, only to end up in enormous debt and bring trouble to the door of our peoples’ hero. I would be ashamed for anyone to even know she’s from our village. So please, feel free to do whatever you want with her.”

Oh, wow. Gyes, man, you sure have turned into a man of reason since I last saw you.

Actually, no. Judging by his face, he was actually lamenting the kind of woman his daughter had turned into.

Linia frowned. "Hey, Daddy, isn't that a bit cruel, mew? I was in a real bind there, you know. If things hadn't gone the way they did, I'd have been a sex toy for some perverted nobles."

"As I recall, Lord Rudeus," he said, mostly ignoring her, "your libido was strong even as a child. Mating season should start soon enough. When that happens, you are welcome to use Linia as you please."

"Mew! Daddy, have you no concern for your daughter's chastity?!" Linia waved her fists in the air, incensed.

Gyes glared at her, his throat rumbling low and deep as he snapped, "Silence. If you claim to be one of the beastfolk, then you should offer your body freely to repay what you owe."

"Urgh..." Linia shrunk back. "F-fine, I understand, mew. I was the one in the wrong, mew." She hid behind me again.

Look, I don't mind if you use me as a shield, but don't push your breasts up against my back. I have no intention of doing anything to you, mating season or not.

"At any rate, it is true that someone needs to be there to look after the Sacred Beast, and we haven't the means of returning the debt Linia owes anyway," said Gyes. "So please take her with you when you go."

Someone to look after Leo, huh? I didn't really think he needed that, but the Doldia Tribe did have their duty to fulfill. If they wanted to watch over him, I had no reason to refuse them. Besides, it would be a bigger problem for me if Linia did remain.

"However," Gyes continued, "I do feel uneasy sending Linia by herself."

I nodded. "That makes sense."

"Boss, I'd really rather you not agree with him about that, mew..." Linia grumbled miserably from behind me. Unfortunately for her, I understood where her father was coming from. It wasn't

because she was unreliable or anything...just that, lately, she was kinda leaning that way.

“So one more person, then.” Gyes stroked his chin thoughtfully. “Let’s see... Ah yes, what about taking Minitona or Tersena with you to look after the Sacred Beast?”

The moment their names were mentioned, the two girls stepped forth, both fully decked out in leather armor with thick swords on their backs. They were both muscular with ample breasts. They’d been rather well endowed when they were younger, but they’d only matured since then. The beastfolk were the perfect tribe for any fan of big chests.

“I’ll go, mew,” said Minitona.

Tersena shook her head. “No, I will.”

“I’m better with a sword and smarter too, mew.”

“She lies. We both attended the school in Zandport, and I was the one with the better grades.”

Were they really that desperate to wait on Leo hand and foot? Fifteen years away from this place would kill any chance either of them had at becoming chief one day, if that’s what they wanted. Or was it a greater honor in their tribe to look after the Sacred Beast than to become chief?

“Tersena may have had the better magic grades, but I was better at everything else, mew,” Minitona insisted.

“That’s not true at all, Tona. You big liar!”

“You’re the liar, Tersena!”

The two reminded me of Linia and Pursena, each defending their own position.

Oh yeah, come to think of it... “Has Pursena not made it back home yet?” I asked.

Gyes’s expression immediately soured.

“This way.”

I was led to a building at the edge of the village. It was a familiar place for me, at least. Truly familiar. I had once lived here myself before. It was quite a comfortable little spot, although I did end up sharing it with a roommate at one point—a middle-aged man with a monkey’s face. It had been a nice accommodation even so. The security was top-notch and—okay, yeah. Enough of the jokes. Basically, they brought me to the jail.

Linia refused to enter, apparently having had bad experiences with this place herself.

Once inside, I stared silently. Pursena was lazily stretched across a bed, looking utterly slovenly. They hadn’t stripped her completely as they did me, but what she was wearing left her pretty exposed. She wore a plain, unsexy gray shirt and cropped pants. Her back was turned to us, and I watched through the metal bars as she stuffed her hand down the waistband of her pants to scratch at her tail. The complete lack of femininity was startling.

“Hey, Pursena, wake up!” Gyes snapped.

“Ngh, I can’t eat any more...” Pursena mumbled in her sleep, tail wagging back and forth.

“It’s mealtime.”

It was the oldest trick in the book and she fell for it immediately.

“...Nghah!” Pursena jolted upright and sprang up, pausing momentarily to yawn. “Fwaaah...”

As she stretched, the thin fabric of her shirt stretched across her breasts, which were as large as I remembered. Her clothes fit her like

a glove, and it was poison to the eyes. The kind of poison that no amount of detoxification magic could cure.

“Hm? I don’t smell any food.” Pursena’s nose twitched as she glanced around groggily. Her eyes landed on us.

“Pursena, you have a visitor,” said Gyes.

Pursena blankly stared back at first, but the moment she saw me, her eyes flew wide open and she lunged herself at the bars, clinging to them. “Boss! You’ve got this all wrong. I’m innocent, I swear! You gotta help me!”

This time, I was the one taken aback.

Gyes let out a long sigh.



Chapter 9: The Case of the Jerky Thief

THE INCIDENT TOOK PLACE ten days prior, as the rainy season began in the Doldia Village. Someone had murdered—err, wait, this isn't a detective novel. I mean, someone stole some dried Rainforest Lizard meat the village had stored for later consumption. Naturally, the warriors conducted an immediate investigation. There was only one suspect: a female warrior named Pursena Adoldia.

Pursena was the daughter of the Adoldia tribe's chief, and she had only returned to the village about six months ago. She'd come back as an accomplished graduate of the Ranoa University of Magic and promptly announced to everyone, "As a candidate for future matriarch of our people, I have returned to fulfill my duty! By the way, Linia is a big loser." And thus, she entered the Doldia Tribe's militia.

The matriarch is the person at the apex of the hierarchy of the Doldia tribes, which included the Dedoldia and the Adoldia. You didn't earn that kind of position simply by wanting it. You needed adequate strength and the trust of the other warriors, and it was also necessary to earn the position of warrior chief before the reigning patriarch stepped down.

Pursena had both the talent and accomplished history to ascend to the position of warrior chief except for one small issue: she'd left the village before she could enter the militia's ranks and had spent over a decade away. She wasn't accustomed to being a part of the community. That was why the current chief and patriarch, Gyes, had agreed to let her train for the position. Once she was competent at her work in the village, and had memorized all the scents and faces of the other members, she would be promoted to warrior chief.

From there, she could someday earn herself the title of matriarch. You could call it an elite induction course.

Since Pursena knew high-level healing magic, she earned the other warriors' respect in no time. Gyes was satisfied with her progress. Once the rainy season was over, he planned to have her marry, then he would promote her to warrior chief.

That, sadly, was when the incident occurred.

The night the food was stolen, Pursena was on duty in front of their provisions storehouse. It was packed full in preparation for the upcoming rainy season, and at night, they always had a group of two keeping an eye on the place.

The person working alongside Pursena at the time was another Adoldian warrior by the name of Kanaluna. Unfortunately, Kanaluna she was feeling ill that day. The day before, she'd been hurt fighting one of the many beasts that appeared in these parts, and the wound had festered without proper treatment. Kanaluna had claimed it was nothing to worry about, but the person working the afternoon shift before her attested, "During the shift change, her face was white as a sheet."

As was proper for an upcoming matriarch, Pursena told her, "Go home and rest. I'll take care of things here." Kanaluna did as she was told and slipped into the nap room to catch a few winks. She only intended to rest her eyes for a little while, but she was out like a light—perhaps because her body needed the extra sleep to heal itself.

Early the following morning, a single warrior arrived at the storehouse for the shift change. But when he got there, he noticed that one of the guards who should have been present was nowhere to be seen. Thinking it suspicious, he looked inside the storehouse, only to find someone had broken in and ravaged the place, devouring things left and right. But that wasn't all—Pursena was in

there with crumbs all over her face, happily snoring away, having filled her belly.

Pursena was arrested on the spot for her crime. In the Doldia Village, food theft during the rainy season was a serious crime. Whatever trust she'd built up with the other warriors evaporated, and her chances at becoming warrior chief—let alone matriarch—were obliterated.

Anyway, that was how she ended up in the slammer.

"Someone came up behind me that day and decked me in the head, knocking me clean out. The next thing I knew, I was inside the storehouse," claimed Pursena. "Someone framed me, the sick bastard! Boss, I'm begging you. Search for the real criminal! I'll bet there was someone out there who didn't want me becoming the matriarch. Minitona and Tersena seem the most suspicious, if you ask me!"

She huffed, adding, "And anyway, none of it makes any sense. I'd never be stupid enough to get caught that quickly if I was really behind the theft. It would be too obvious, especially after I sent Kanaluna home. I wouldn't pig out like that, either—I'd swipe stuff little by little so no one found me out!"

She was insistent about her innocence. I could say from my first impression of them—and from personal experience—that the beastfolk were skilled at wrongly accusing people. If Pursena really was innocent, then I wanted to help her.

I decided to do a little investigating.

The Doldia Village was a mix of Dedoldians and Adoldians. Since its primary duty was to look after and protect the Sacred Beast, many of its inhabitants were in the militia, but there also were many married couples and children since they raised their young here. It

was a pretty large settlement of about five hundred people, all living atop the trees.

Since the land below them flooded completely during the rainy season, they were more like an island in the middle of a continent. This made it exceedingly unlikely that the culprit was an outsider. There couldn't be many out there who could navigate these stormy waters like I could.

If we assumed that Pursena was telling the truth, then the most likely explanation was that someone here had framed her. So with the help of my trusty assistant Watson and police inspector Gyes, I set about gathering evidence and testimony from witnesses.

"And there you have it," I said. "Let's get going, Watson."

Linia tilted her head. "Who's this Watson, mew?"

"That's you, Linia. There's a certain country out there where people call their assistant Watson," I explained.

"Uh, okay..."

Gyes seemed to have no problems being given the title of police inspector, but despite that indulgence, he did sigh as if he thought this whole thing was an exercise in futility.

First Witness Testimony

NAME: **Gimel**

PROFESSION: **Warrior**

ASSOCIATION WITH THE ACCUSED: **First responder at the scene**

"So you're the one who first discovered the scene of the crime?" I clarified.

"Yes."

Déjà vu hit me the moment I spotted the man in question. I was pretty sure I had seen him somewhere before.

Maybe I should ask.

Character Select: Gimel

Dialogue Option: Inquire about past

“Have I met you somewhere before?” I asked.

The man nodded. “Yes. Ten years ago, I fell into the water and you saved me.”

Oh, interesting. Come to think of it, ten years ago Ruijerd and I did save someone during the rainy season. I remembered the cute little boy wagging his tail at me in gratitude.

Boy, that sure brings back memories.

Anyway, that didn’t matter right now. I had to focus on solving this mystery.

“When you found Pursena ten days ago after she’d stolen into the storehouse and eaten all that food, how did the place look? Can you describe the scene for me?”

“Uh, let’s see... The boxes of lizard jerky were cracked open and Pursena was curled up in front of them, fast asleep. Her stomach was all bloated and she was cradling the food with her hands, a smile on her face as she mumbled to herself, ‘I can’t eat another bite.’”

I could picture that so vividly in my mind. Perhaps because it sounded almost exactly like the scene I’d witnessed a few brief moments ago.

“In other words, no one actually directly saw her eating the jerky, correct?”

He nodded. “That’s right. Although, we did find some of the meat stuck between her teeth, and her saliva smelled like that of some of the half-eaten jerky she’d discarded nearby on the ground.”

Huh. The Doldians sure did have a unique way of investigating. A person's innocence or lack thereof could be established by smell alone. They had absolute confidence in their schnozzes. As far as they were concerned, finding the scent of the stolen goods on someone's saliva was all the proof they needed. But it wasn't foolproof.

"You say that her stomach was bloated with food, but am I correct in assuming you don't actually know whether it was the jerky inside her or not?" I asked.

"No. But her burp also carried the scent of the lizard meat. I've eaten it before, so I know exactly what it smells like," he said.

Or maybe it was foolproof, whoops.

If they could detect the scent of whatever was inside her belly, then it was practically guaranteed that Pursena had, in fact, devoured the jerky. Assuming no one had cut her open with giant scissors and stuffed her stomach full of the jerky, that is.

"Was there anything else?" I pressed him, hoping for something. "For instance...footprints belonging to someone other than Pursena?"

"No. No other footprints, no other scents, and no other hair found at the scene."

Interesting. Well, in that case, the true culprit had committed the perfect crime.

Second Witness Testimony

NAME: **Kanaluna**

PROFESSION: **Warrior**

ASSOCIATION WITH THE ACCUSED: Fellow night shift guard

“Miss Kanaluna,” I said, “what was Pursena like on the day of the incident?”

“She kept saying the same thing over and over. ‘I haven’t eaten anything since this morning. I’m starving.’”

So Pursena was famished on the day of the crime. That was awfully strange, given the Pursena I knew was always chowing down on something regardless of whether it was mealtime or not. She was like a garbage can, eating any kind of meat: dried, smoked, or raw.

Something seemed amiss here.

“And can you tell me why she hadn’t eaten?”

“When we were exterminating monsters the day before, there were a bunch of people who got injured,” she explained.

That had been written in the report as well; the day before, an enormous group of monsters had appeared. They were fortunate that no civilians were injured, but many of their warriors were badly hurt.

“Hm,” I said.

“Pursena is the only one in the village who can use advanced healing magic. She was running back and forth constantly trying to heal all those who’d been seriously hurt. In the end, she collapsed from lack of mana.”

I had experienced that myself before; when you ran dry, you passed out and didn’t wake for half a day, or even a whole day in some cases. Pursena was no exception. She must have passed out, and by the time she awoke, it was her turn for guard duty. From the sounds of things, she went straight to work without eating or drinking a thing.

“Couldn’t you guys have fed her or something?” I asked.

Kanaluna shook her head. “The rules are the rules.”

During the rainy season, any snacking or eating outside regular meal times was prohibited. They kept strict tabs on their provisions to ensure they didn't run out before the three-month period was over.

"What about letting her skip out on duty for the day?"

"So many monsters attacked the day before that a good portion of our warriors were still bedridden. We didn't have enough people. As much as we would have liked to let her rest, even she herself said, 'It's just a little hunger, nothing serious.'"

It made sense. She probably felt a sense of duty as the future matriarch. That was admirable. She'd be a shining example to my past lazy self who tried every excuse in the book to skip out on his obligations.

"And that's what led to the incident," I surmised.

"Correct. I keep thinking, if only I had found her something to eat back then, this might never have happened."

The circumstances seemed to warrant an exception in this case for Pursena's offense, but that would be difficult since the suspect in question still steadfastly claimed she hadn't done it.

Watson's Input

"Watson..." I shook my head. "No, Linia. What do you think, having heard all of that?" I figured it was worth asking my assistant, since she was Pursena's friend, after all.

"I thought she was guilty from the start, mew."

"Hm."

"She's always had the habit of swiping anything available and devouring it when her stomach's empty, mew. She's even eaten some of my dried fish before, you know."

So she already has a prior offense on her record...

Having heard what everyone had to say, I noticed there was only one witness whose statement seemed inconsistent. Someone had to be lying. But who could it be?

Character Select: Pursena

Correct, it was Pursena. She was the only one who hadn't admitted to her own actions, claiming someone had punched her from behind.

I returned to the jail to question her about it once more.

Action Select: Move location

Location: Edge of the village → Jail

Character Select: Pursena

Dialogue Option: Ask about incident

"Pursena," I said. "Are you absolutely certain you aren't guilty? Look me in the eyes and tell me."

"I mean it, Boss. Believe me." She gazed directly at me, eyes glimmering and hands clasped in front of her. The one thing that seemed suspicious was the way her tail wagged.

Time to trick her into telling the truth.

"If I advocate for you, there's a good chance I can get you out of here," I offered.

"I knew you could do it, Boss!"

"But, if you do leave this cell and I discover you are lying, I won't let you eat meat for a whole year."

Pursena flinched. "W-well, of c-course I'm n-not lying!"

I stared her down. "Can you swear to God?"

"I-I can!" Her eyes darted back and forth nervously.

I knew something was fishy. That's a guilty look if I've ever seen one.

"Just so you're aware, I show no mercy to those who blaspheme my God." I reached through the bars and grabbed her head in my hands, forcing her to look me in the face as I spoke to her. "Can you *truly* swear to God?"

Pursena was fully aware of the person I revered so greatly. Her face went deathly pale and her entire body began to tremble. She curled her tail between her legs and grabbed the tip of it with both hands.

"Well?"

"I-It was me. I did it," she finally blurted.

And with that, the case was solved. The culprit was, as everyone expected, Pursena Adoldia. She laid the blame on an unidentified third party because she didn't want to admit responsibility. Sneaky little devil. Although she *was* bewitched by the meat, so perhaps she was a victim herself in a way.

"Mister Gyes, I apologize for the extra trouble," I said.

"It's fine. More importantly, are you sure you're all right with Pursena?"

He'd watched the whole thing play out with an exasperated look, but now that everything was resolved, he seemed eager about something I couldn't place. "All right with Pursena, for what?"

"I'm speaking, of course, about the other warrior you plan to take with you to look after the Sacred Beast."

Um, what? Hold up here. I never said a word about wanting Pursena to fill that role.

He seemed way too excited about the prospect of me taking Pursena. Although, I guess I had brought her up in the first place. It made sense that he'd gotten the wrong idea.

“Are you truly sure you want her?” he asked again.

“No, I don’t.”

Of course I didn’t want her! I’d be suspected of cheating once again if I let her into our house on a daily basis. Sylphie and Roxy had both given me beautiful baby girls, and I didn’t want to screw up my whole family because of this idiot. I could already picture her gobbling up all our meat, and how bitter Aisha and Lilia would be afterward. The only person who’d welcome her with open arms would be Eris.

In any case, it would be better to have someone more serious, who wouldn’t get me accused of two-timing. Like...yeah, Gimel for instance.

“I see, so you would prefer someone else.” Gyes nodded thoughtfully. “Then will you be going with Minitona or Tersena?”

“No, those two are also candidates to become matriarch, right? There must be someone else.”

We started toward the exit as we discussed our options.

“Ah, wait! Don’t leave me here, Boss! Get me out. I want you to take me with you! I don’t wanna live a life without meat!”

We both ignored the voice shouting after us.

“Mewhahaha!” Linia cackled as she slipped through the door, having waited outside this whole time. It seemed she’d been thrown in here naked before, and going in would only make her relive that shame. That was why she’d vehemently refused to accompany me at first.

“Heya, Pursena. I see you got your just deserts, mew!”

Pursena’s jaw dropped. “L-Linia?! I thought I caught a whiff of your scent. What are you doing here?!”

For some reason, Linia was sporting a pair of sunglasses. They were the same ones she’d worn while she was working—the ones

that hid the way her eyes turned into dollar signs as she counted her money.

“Why, you ask? Mewhehe. You really don’t know, mew?” Linia grabbed my arm and pressed her breasts against it.

Knock that off already. Urgh, I can already smell you going into heat.

“D-don’t tell me that you and Boss are...?” Pursena’s nose twitched as she sniffed the air, and her lips trembled.

Linia’s lips pulled into a truly sinister grin. “You got it. Ah, that reminds mew of the passionate night we spent together. Boss picked me up and carried me-ow like a princess in his arms. Oh no, I can’t share any more than that, mew! Just know that Boss made me-ow weep that day.”

“Th-that can’t be...” Pursena shook her head in disbelief. “Boss said it’d be doing dirty by Fitz and Roxy, so he wouldn’t even give us the time of day!”

“Mewhaha! Don’t ya think the only reason he never paid you any attention is because you weren’t attractive enough? The second it was just him and me-ow, he couldn’t get enough. Aw man, I tell ya, the noble blood of the Greyrats flows strong in his veins. Our first night together was so rough, I thought he might break one of my ribs, mew.”

“B-break one of your ribs?! Just how rough was the sex you were having?”

She was probably referring the first night she spent with Eris. Eris had a habit of practically squeezing her bedmate to death in her sleep. I’d fallen victim to that before. So had Leo, and apparently Linia. The next morning, Linia was on the verge of tears as she had Sylphie heal her wounds. She wasn’t lying about the details at least.

“L-Linia, you’re Boss’s wife now?”

“Nah, not his wife exactly, mew...” Linia paused for exaggerated effect and then said, “But basically, I’m like his slave, mew.”

“His slave?!” Pursena’s face went bright red as she slapped her hands over her mouth.

Well, the slave part wasn’t a lie, either.

“You could say I’ve carved out a pretty good spot for myself, mew. I may be his slave, but he lets me work and I’ve got fifty subordinates under me-ow. Unlike you, I’ll never be thrown in jail, *and* I get to enjoy Boss’s affections. Oh, but I gotta admit, it would be way more grand to be the Doldia’s matriarch, mew. But you seem to be out of the running for that. Mewhaha!”

Her obnoxious laughter filled the room.

“Liniaaaa!” Pursena’s face heated with anger as she grabbed the metal bars and shook them. Slowly but surely, the strength left her body until she at least slumped to her knees, sniffing. “It’s not fair... That day, I really was so busy I couldn’t find time to eat a single bite the whole day. I didn’t even eat that much from the storehouse—only what I’d eat during any normal meal. We could replenish that much by killing and drying out another beast...” She slumped forward and began weeping.

Linia finally peeled herself from me. “Aaah, that felt good, mew.” She did look truly satisfied.

What a terrible person.

That said, I did think that Pursena’s exceptional circumstances deserved some consideration. The monster attack had gone on from midnight until early morning. Whoever was on guard duty at the time was responsible for the number of injuries, as far as I was concerned. Their misstep had shifted the burden onto Pursena, as one of the tribe’s healers. Once all the monsters were dealt with, she’d worked tirelessly to heal people, which was probably why so many were saved. But in the end, she collapsed, having spent all her

mana. They gave her no time to eat when she finally woke up and was sent straight to guard duty.

What she'd gone through would have been rough on anyone. There were some parts of the situation that, really, no one could be faulted for. Granted, she *did* steal food. Even though she'd been assigned to guard duty after not eating for an entire day, that wasn't an excuse to swipe food. Back in Japan, if a police officer was discovered to have committed a crime, they were immediately removed from duty. She was due some consideration for her circumstances, but a crime was still a crime. She had defied one of the village's rules. She couldn't very well complain that she was no longer in the running for warrior chief or matriarch.

"Hey, Boss, Dad..." Linia turned toward us, her expression now solemn. "I have a favor to ask, mew." She lowered her entire upper body in the perfect forty-five-degree bow. "I would like you to appoint Pursena to look after the Sacred Beast, mew."

When she lifted her face again, she stared right at us with determination in her eyes. I stood up a little straighter, ready to hear her out.

"The two of us went to those far off, foreign lands so we could become the best we could be as potential future matriarchs, mew. I'm confident we put in more effort than anyone else. We'd never have become head of the class otherwise, mew. When I lost to Pursena at the very end, I gave up and let her walk the path of our people. But I only did it 'cause I thought she'd make a great matriarch, mew. I don't think it's fair for her to have to start back at square one for a single mewstake."

Linia paused and took a breath before turning toward her father. "I want you to give her a chance, mew. If she's able to look after the Sacred Beast for the next five years—no, make that ten—like she's supposed to and fulfills the role assigned to her, then let

her come back here with Boss's daughter and forgive her for her crime, mew. I won't ask ya to make her the matriarch, but I'd like her to at least have a similarly respectable position, mew."

Her request wasn't the least bit logical. Linia had, herself, abandoned her duties to become a merchant. She had no right to make a request like this. Besides, this crime was a result of Pursena's lack of self-control. I could admit she deserved some leniency because of the exceptional circumstances. Truly, I did...but a crime was still a crime. It was too much to ask for complete forgiveness simply because she'd worked hard up till this point. That wasn't a valid reason.

"I cannot do that," Gyes said, sharing my sentiments.

Mistakes you had made in the past didn't simply disappear, and you couldn't erase them, either. That was how the world worked. I knew that as well as anyone. Still, I wanted her efforts to be rewarded somehow. Pursena had worked her hardest; she earnestly attended her classes, snacking on meat the whole while. We took healing classes together so I knew how dedicated she was. In my mind there was no question that she'd worked twice as hard as most people. That was how she topped her class despite most beastfolk lacking an affinity for magic.

I wanted all of that to pay off for her. I honestly did. Mostly because I empathized with her: if I worked hard at something, I'd want it to bear fruit for me, too.

And if I were in a position to help someone be rewarded, I wanted to do my utmost in that respect.

"Mister Gyes," I cut in. "I hope you don't mind, but I'd also like to ask you to agree to Linia's request."

"Huh? Boss, you mean it?"

Gyes pulled a face, dipping his chin as he contemplated my request. After a moment, he finally raised his head again and said, "Very well. I'll allow it."

The Gyes I used to know would have stubbornly said no until the end. Taking care of the Sacred Beast seemed like an exceedingly prestigious duty, and not something you'd entrust to a criminal who'd stolen food before. To not only let Pursena have that honor but to wipe her slate clean too? It was foolish. The only one who benefited from this was Pursena, and enormously, too.

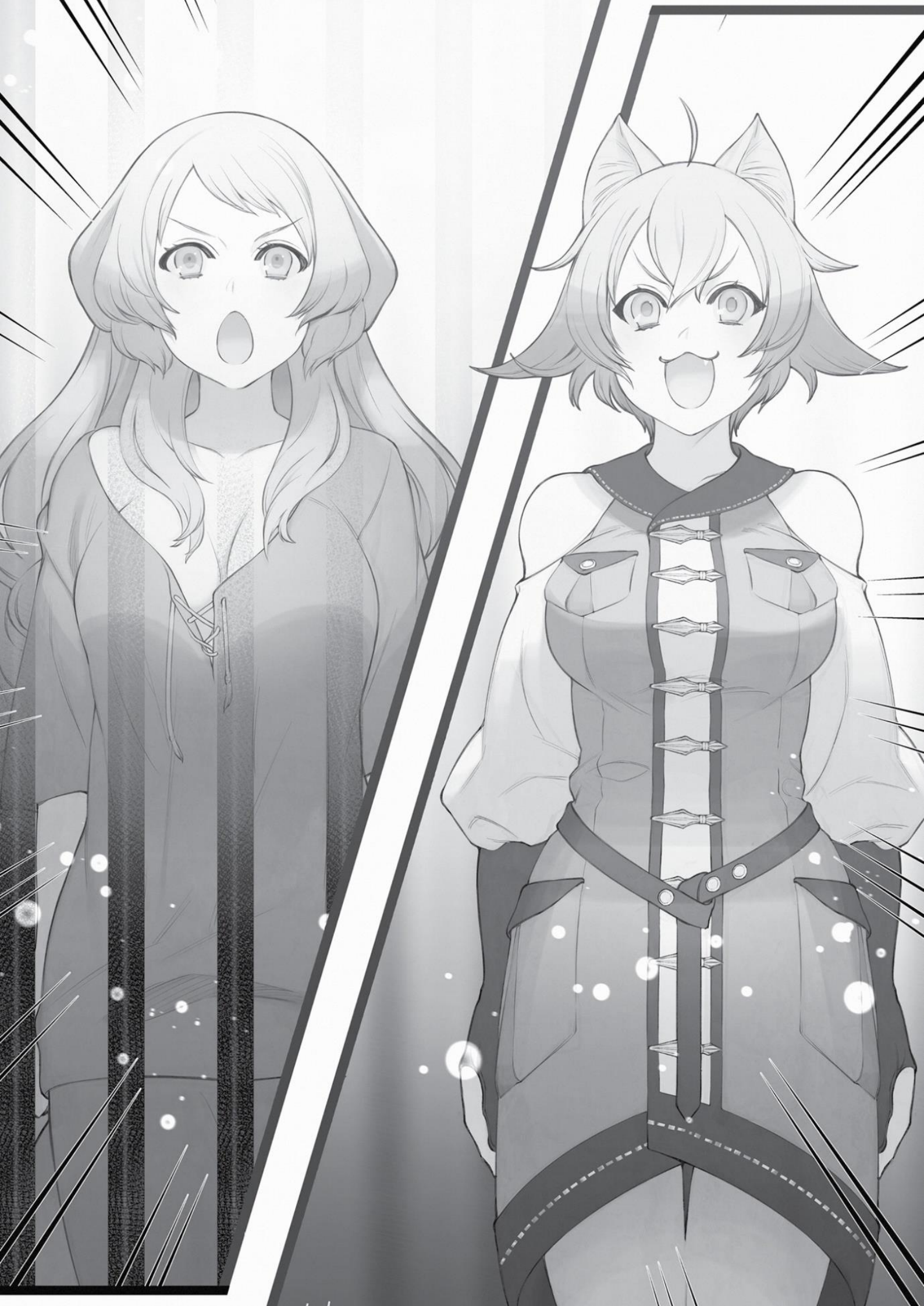
Honestly, I wasn't even sure my judgment on this matter was correct. I was probably making a mistake, but that was exactly why I acknowledged I was being selfish.

"Linia, Pursena," I said, "you'd best make sure to fulfill your duties properly. Understood?"

"Yessir, mew!"

"You got it!"

The two girls bowed their heads at the same time. As I watched them, I found myself thinking, *These two really are at their best when they're together.*



We used the raft to return the way we came, heading toward the Holy Sword Highway. When we found the monument to the Seven Great Powers, I figured it was as good a time as any and pulled out my flute. I managed to summon Arumanfi, who led us back to the floating fortress.

“This place sure brings back memories. Never thought I’d come back to the city I once ruled before,” Pursena spoke nostalgically as she gazed at the Magic City of Sharia from where we stood on the floating fortress.

Yes, she had indeed come back to the very place she might call her second home.

“Oh, Pursena, there is one teeny thing I forgot to mention, mew,” said Linia.

“What is it? I’m kinda getting sentimental over here, so I’d appreciate it if you kept whatever you wanna say short.”

“Well, I *did* help you out. So for a while, you’re going to be my underling, got it?”

“Huh?!”

And that was how Pursena became Linia’s lackey.

Chapter 10: The Other Slave (Part 1)

SEVERAL DAYS HAD PASSED since the gruesome incident I'd named the Jerky Murder. Pursena returned to Sharia with us, and Eris was more than happy to dote on her. She also joined the ranks of our mercenary band, but that's a whole other story.

Today, I was working with Zanoba as usual, trying to improve my Magic Armor. We were making some minor adjustments to Version Two while developing a more powerful Version Three and Version Four.

I had a whole mountain of ideas, but the majority were either impossible or next-to-impossible to bring to fruition. Our development was slow to progress, but I enjoyed the process of working with someone and making baby steps toward our goal. Today was no different; Zanoba and I sat opposite one another, studying the blueprints spread out in front of us.

It was then that Zanoba suddenly blurted out, "It seems like Julie is hiding something from me."

"Really? Julie, of all people?"

He nodded. "Yes. She's doing something in secret behind my back."

"Huh."

It was rare for him to worry about anything other than dolls and figures, but it was especially strange for Julie to be weighing on his mind. Perhaps she'd grown on him since they'd lived together for so long now.

"So," I said, "what do you mean by 'in secret'?"

"Lately she's been going to the market by herself. Even if I ask her what she bought, she won't answer me. In fact, she won't even

show me the figure she's supposed to be working on. It's like she's making something else without my knowledge. I have tried asking her what she's doing, but all she does is brush me off..."

"Well, she is getting to be that age. Maybe this is just a phase?"

Julie'd had her first period not too long ago, and physical changes often brought about mental changes: in short, Julie was entering puberty. She'd known Zanoba since she was very young, but he was still a man. It wasn't strange for her to be embarrassed about him discovering her secrets. Like, for instance, the color of her underwear. That kinda stuff.

"What do you suppose I should do?" Zanoba asked.

"I don't see any option but to leave her to her own devices."

Everyone went through puberty at some point. It was a normal part of life—the period where a person gradually transformed from a child to an adult. Changes always had a ripple effect, which meant those around them had to change how they treated the person who was maturing. You had to start treating them as more of an adult or risk driving them to rebel.

Having said that, Zanoba needed time to figure out how to interact with her. There was no fixed script for how to deal with people. It was something you had to learn over time.

"Hm, since she's a slave, forcing her to answer would be an option, I'm sure, but..." Zanoba trailed off.

"You plan to make her tell you?"

He shook his head. "No, no. She may live with me now, but she actually belongs to you, Master. I don't have the authority to do that. Though I would not oppose your decision if you requested it of me." There was hesitation in manner even as he said that. Calling her my slave was just an excuse; even if she belonged to him, he had no intention of forcing her to obey him. I couldn't blame him for that. I was no different.

“As long as it’s nothing bad and isn’t causing problems, I don’t see the harm in leaving her be. Do you?”

“Urgh.” Zanoba scrunched his face. “I actually do consider it a substantial problem that she won’t share the figurine she’s finished...”

“I guess I can see where you’re coming from,” I said. “Hmm, in that case, why not ask Miss Ginger to try talking to her?”

If it was something Julie didn’t feel comfortable sharing with a man, perhaps she would be more open to sharing with a woman. She was a young girl entering puberty, so it was probably hard for her to discuss certain things with the opposite sex. That was what I assumed, anyway.

“Hm? Ah, that is a splendid idea!” Zanoba’s face lit up. “Surely Ginger will be able to handle the matter smoothly!”

It was hard to believe Julie was already entering puberty. Time sure went by quickly. It probably wouldn’t be long before my little Lucie hit the same stage in her life. She been growing more used to me lately, and a fond father-daughter relationship was beginning to bloom between us. Alas, I was sure the day would come when she’d go back to being fussy and obstinate, saying things like, “I don’t want you to wash my underwear with Daddy’s!” and “I hate getting in the bath after Daddy. It’s disgusting!” Urgh, just imagining it made my stomach knot.

I promise I won’t force you to get in the bath with me, so please at least be willing to sit at the same dinner table.

“By the way, Master, there’s another topic I’d like to broach with you,” said Zanoba.

“Oh?”

“Do you have any interest in boxes?”

“Boxes?”

Was he referring to a sweat box? As in, a club? A sweat box might refer instead to a place where lots of people gathered, from what I understood of the young people's slang. Since I had a mercenary band and thus plenty of opportunities for large gatherings, it might be worth looking into. Sure, I was interested.

Wait, there's no way that's what he means. This is Zanoba we're talking about. It's probably a treasure box or something like that. Yeah, that's was more likely. There were probably lots of those boxes out there encrusted with gems and the like. I'd seen ones like that at Perugius's place, and they were the very definition of luxury. They were empty, though.

"Yes. Actually, I found a wonderful craftsman. I would like you to see their wares as well," said Zanoba.

To be perfectly frank, I wasn't really interested. On the other hand, it was rare for Zanoba to invite me to see an artisan like this.

"What kind of boxes?" I asked.

"Ones with the most incredible designs. I have seen ones of this caliber before. Actually... Oh, no. It would be better to see them with your own eyes rather than have me explain!"

Huh. I had Zanoba pegged for a guy who only loved figures and nothing else, but it seemed he had a discerning eye when it came to other kinds of craft as well. For someone as picky as him to shower anything in praise made me deeply curious.

"In that case, I guess I'll check it out," I said.

He grinned from ear to ear. "I knew you would say that, Master."

The shop in question was tucked deep in the artisan quarter. I lost track of how many blocks we passed on the way. Far fewer people traversed the artisan quarter than the commerce district, and the buildings were quaint, lacking any distinguishing characteristics. On top of that, you could easily get lost in the winding streets.

Despite the quietness of the streets, there were still quite a few people milling around. It was mostly fussy artisans, who went about with permanent frowns etched on their faces, as if they'd forgotten how to smile. If I were a young child, I'd probably take one look at the people around here and start sobbing.

Zanoba walked with purpose, wasting no time. When we came to forks in the street, he knew exactly where to turn. We went down a short flight of stairs, then clambered up a much larger set. We passed through streets decorated with clotheslines and cut right past a workshop producing strange, purple smoke. Finally, we arrived.

The store was the size of a small civilian house. It wasn't grand and there was no sign out front, either. A thin trail of smoke rose from its chimney, indicating someone was in, but most people would never guess that this was a shop.

"This is it." Zanoba pushed open the door, and a chime echoed to alert the owner that he had customers.

There was barely any light inside. In fact, the only sources of illumination were the streams of sunlight that came in through the window. A few undecorated display cases formed haphazard lines, blocking most of the light from the room. Still, there was enough to see what merchandise they held.

The top shelves had female dolls in fancy outfits. They were similar to porcelain dolls, but made of wood instead. These dolls were tucked in lavishly decorated wooden boxes, all neatly arranged in rows. These dolls and the boxes that contained them were extremely elaborate, which stood in stark contrast to the shop's

general atmosphere and the simple design of the display cases themselves.

These must be the boxes Zanoba was talking about.

“What do you think, Master?” he asked.

“Now I see what you were talking about. These really are nice boxes.”

“I knew you would agree.”

Honestly, the boxes were far more finely constructed than the dolls were. The craftsman had matched the lumber of the boxes to each doll’s design before carefully chiseling them down and decorating them with jewels, and lining them with expensive cloth. Each box almost looked like an intricate bed for its respective doll. Of course, no two boxes were the same; they were all made to order. My only criticism was that the dolls looked so inorganic compared to the organic vibe of the boxes they were contained in. In fact, my figures would look far better nestled in those boxes, amplifying their charm. I got the sense that the creator valued the quality of their boxes more than the dolls themselves.

“Hm?”

I looked a little closer and noticed small letters—names—etched on the boxes. Leila, Abbey, Sofia, Clara, Francine, Natalie...

“Zanoba, what are these names?” I asked.

“Those are the dolls’ names.”

“Oh, okay.”

I’d never named my figurines like that, primarily because they were based on actual people. That said, in my previous world, many people named their porcelain dolls or teddy bears. Naming objects like that usually meant people remained attached to them for far longer. Although the dolls were less stunning than the boxes that contained them, surely it wasn’t because the artisan loved the boxes

more. After all, would a parent love their children less simply because they were ugly? Just so we're clear, my own daughters were as beautiful and lovable as the finest gems.

"Allow me to introduce you to the creator," said Zanoba.

He slipped between the rows of dolls and headed further inside the shop. I hurried after him, passing the display cases into an area with a slightly different atmosphere. This room only had one window, and light from it poured directly across a large workbench. A number of tools were scattered upon it—ones I was quite familiar with myself: wood, glue, wooden dowels, a stiff bristle brush, a painting brush, a file, a scraper, a carving knife, and a chisel. They were all things one would use when making a doll. This store clearly doubled as a workshop.

A man sat at the workbench with his back to us, focused intently on whatever he was crafting. Once Zanoba realized the man hadn't noticed us, he reached for a bell sitting nearby and rang it thrice.

Ding, ding, ding.

It was a clean, clear sound that echoed through the room. The man's shoulders jumped when he heard it.

"Who's there?" he grunted as he slowly lifted himself up and turned toward us.

The man was as tall as Zanoba, with a sharp gaze, hollow cheeks, frazzled hair, and calloused hands. His eyes widened as he scanned the area, looking for the culprit who'd rung his bell. When he spotted a familiar face, his lips curved and his voice went up several decibels—as well as octaves.

"Well, well! Look we have here! If it isn't Master Zanoba."

"That's right," said Zanoba. "I'm back again, Master Belfried."

"You are always more than welcome. What brings you here today?" His voice boomed through the room, and it somehow suited

the man. I was more surprised by how friendly the two were. Perhaps they were brothers in a past life or something.

“I came back to introduce my master to you,” Zanoba said. “I spoke to you about him before, if you’ll remember.”

“Oh, him!” Belfried nodded. “The man responsible for those beautiful girls, yes?!”

“Precisely!” Zanoba turned toward me as he motioned at Belfried. “Master, this is the owner of this workshop, Master Belfried. He is the talented artisan responsible for the number of excellent boxes—or rather, doll beds—you saw decorating the shop.”

His voice was infused with more respect than usual as he showered the man with compliments. *Sure must feel nice to get an introduction as fancy as that.*

“And Master Belfried, this here is my master, the great and powerful magician Rudeus Greyrat. He is himself an eminent craftsman whose figures no other person alive could possibly mimic—the kind of rare talent that will likely be spoken of for many decades after his death.”

His words overflowed with such reverence as he introduced me that it was overkill and actually made me pretty uncomfortable. I didn’t really care how people would speak of me after I was dead. They’d probably only badmouth me as a lady-killer who kept numerous wives.

“I have heard so many rumors about you,” said Belfried. “You are not merely a top-tier magician, but you also a deeply-learned craftsman as well!”

I shook my head. “I assure you, compared to Zanoba, I’m pretty ignorant about this stuff.”

“Oh, you are too modest!”

I didn't want them to put me on this huge pedestal. Truly I was a complete amateur compared to Zanoba and Perugia, who were far more earnestly devoted to the fine arts. I merely had the knowledge about figures I'd brought from my previous life, but even that was shallow at best.

"At any rate," I said, "those boxes were absolutely fantastic. Even at just a glance, I—"

"They're beds," Belfried interrupted, his tone stern. "That's where my daughters sleep. Please, I would ask you to refer to them as beds."

Huh. He was sure particular about that.

"Right. Beds, then," I corrected myself. "I understand. They are such fine craftsmanship that 'bed' does seem the more fitting term for them."

"I am of the mind to ask you to collaborate with me at some point, so I would ask you to be mindful about how you speak of my girls' beds in the future."

"R-right."

Well, I could do that if that's all he wanted.

I glanced at Zanoba, who looked particularly apologetic. Judging by the way he spoke, he must have similarly invoked Belfried's anger this way. Still, I was pretty sure he'd referred to them as boxes when he'd spoken to me.

Belfried seemed a little fussy, but his craftsmanship and attention to detail with these "beds" was top-notch. Zanoba was right about one thing: we might really want to collaborate with this man in due time. Just as one preferred to put their expensive paintings in similar-quality frames, it was best to put extravagant figures in boxes that suited them. We had no need for such boxes in our plans for the Ruijerd figure, but perhaps we might find a use for them on a different occasion. For instance, if we presented a gift to

Perugius or wanted to sell something to Asuran nobility. There were plenty of ways his skills might come in handy.

“Master Belfried, I realize you may be an exceedingly talented artisan, but the impudence you showed my master is—”

“It’s fine, Zanoba,” I interrupted. “I see nothing wrong with his request. It’s important to be particular about certain things.”

Zanoba frowned as if not entirely convinced, but Belfried really did seem to consider his boxes as beds for his dolls. He made them with the desire to give his dolls a comfortable, serene place to sleep, and it was those feelings that propelled him to perfect his craft to this quality.

“Speaking of collaboration...” Belfried paused, seeming to remember something. His gaze turned back to Zanoba. “That little figure maker of yours came to the shop the other day.”

Figure maker?

“Julie did?” asked Zanoba.

Ah, so that’s who he was referring to.

I couldn’t shake my mental image of her as an inexperienced amateur, which was why it felt so strange hearing Belfried refer to her like some kind of professional crafter. It was true, however, that her skills had grown immensely. Aside from the use of magic, her skills had far surpassed mine. She was likely a fine maker of figures by the standards of this world.

“That’s odd. I haven’t asked Julie to purchase anything,” Zanoba muttered.

“I must tell you, Miss Julie, she...oh, I can hardly express it!” Belfried continued rambling, completely ignoring Zanoba’s reaction. For whatever reason, he seemed extremely enthusiastic.

Don’t tell me this guy is a true-born lolicon who somehow witnessed Julie doing something perverted. I mean, the two of us

might have something in common then, but I definitely don't want him coming anywhere near my daughters in that case.

"What did Julie do?" Zanoba narrowed his eyes in suspicion.

"The words, I...I'm afraid I cannot even find the right ones to express what happened!" Belfried cried in delight.

Zanoba and I exchanged glances.

Let me try asking. Don't worry, you can leave this to me. I may not look it, but as the face of our company, I've recently dipped my toes into the business of extracting information from people. I even handled an interrogation to discover the true criminal behind a robbery.

"Please, calm down and explain yourself," I said. "What exactly did Julie come here for?"

"A figure—she brought a figure with her."

I stared back at him. "A figure?"

He wasn't exactly answering my question, but I was willing to let that slide for now.

"Yes. It was one I had never seen before in my life. It was incredible. Absolutely, positively incredible. A masterpiece!"

Once again, Zanoba and I exchanged looks. Julie had shown us every single piece she had made. Zanoba had safely tucked most of them away in his storehouse. She would need his permission to take one out. However, Zanoba had mentioned that she wouldn't let him see her most recent work.

"Ah, I can't stop myself from trembling just thinking about it. See? My hands are shaking because the joy is so overwhelming." Belfried held his hands out for us to see, and they were exactly as he'd described...though I personally sensed something far more sinister than joy.

“And so I thought to myself, I need to pour these feelings—this affection, this delight—into my own craftsmanship. Have a look for yourself!” Belfried scurried back over to his table and grabbed something before returning to us. He was cradling a box in his hands.

No, not a box. I need to call it a “bed” while I’m here in this shop.

It was white with gold decorations. The fabric lining it was a luxurious light pink that complemented the rest of the colors perfectly. Although it lacked gems, unlike the others I’d seen, that simplicity only added to its elegance. It almost reminded me of a palace canopy bed.

“This is the bed I made for her!” Belfried declared. “I can count the number of times I have felt this creatively inspired before. That’s how impactful it was! Ahh, this is the first time I’ve ever been able to create such a fantastic bed in only a few days’ time.”

It was impressively well made; there was no doubt about that. I’d seen a lot of stunning works of art from all over, which was why I instantly recognized this as a rare gem. It was a step above the specimens in the display cases, with craftsmanship fit for a king. Even Perugia would likely recognize its quality.

“Oh, Master Zanoba, I cannot believe you would tease me like that—having your little dollmaker show off a work of that caliber.”

“Hm, but I’m afraid I’m completely in the dark myself...” Zanoba glanced over at me.

I was a little lost, but I guessed that Julie had brought a figure here. It was so impressive that it drove Belfried to make a bed for it by his own choosing. That was what I had gathered. The problem was that Zanoba had no memory of ordering Julie to do such a thing. That had to mean she’d done it of her own volition. But why?

“Why did Julie bring that figure here? Did she say anything?” I asked.

"I haven't the faintest idea. I got so excited the moment I saw the figure that I didn't hear what she'd brought it in for. Though most people bring their adorable daughters here because they want to give them a bed where they can sleep peacefully. Perhaps that was her intention?"

Huh... I had a hard time believing there were so many people wanting a bed for their doll. That was so niche that only customers with that specific interest would probably ever come to this shop. Could Julie be one of them?

Zanoba cleared his throat and said, "When one marries off one of their daughters, their betrothed will be much happier having a bed to put them in."

Marry off? Betrothed? I blinked at him. *Oh, I get it.* In other words, having a box to put a doll in raised its value when selling it. That made sense.

"Precisely," said Belfried. "That was why I was hoping this one might marry into my home. I tried to purchase her for two hundred Asuran gold coins, but... unfortunately, your dollmaker ran from me."

"Two hundred Asuran gold coins...?" I stared at the man.

"Oh! Master Rudeus, please don't give me that look. You must think the worst of me, trying to buy a piece of such quality for a measly two hundred coins. But I swear to you, that was all I had on my person at the time! I now have three hundred to offer. No, no! I'm willing to go as far as three hundred and fifty!"

What shocked me was that a figure would fetch such a high price in the first place. But did this mean Julie was trying to sell it?

"But why would she try to sell it?" I mumbled to myself.

Belfried gave me a quizzical look. "Why not? The more money the better, no? You can never have too much."

“I’m more curious about what she’d use it for. She’s never needed for anything up until now...at least, not as far as I’ve heard.” I glanced at Zanoba. It was possible that Zanoba had failed to provide something for her, which led to her needing money herself. If, for instance, Zanoba was suddenly drowning in insane debt like someone else I knew.

Zanoba shook his head. “Lately her skills have improved immensely, so I’ve been giving her a generous wage.”

I had been the one who came up with the idea of paying her. Zanoba had been shocked at the concept of giving money to a slave, but he didn’t quibble about it. Julie was working hard enough that she deserved that much. It was only natural to pay her.

“Hmm... Yes, that’s right, Master Julie is a slave, isn’t she?” Belfried stroked his chin. “In that case, perhaps she’s trying to buy her freedom?”

“Her freedom?” I echoed back.

“Indeed.”

Slaves were generally bought and sold for coin—purchased one place then auctioned off somewhere else. Their individual rights differed based on the country they were in and who owned them. There were some countries that prioritized proper treatment of slaves, and others that were far less concerned about that.

It was rather easy to become a slave. If you didn’t have any money, then you could visit a slaver and sell yourself off. There were many people who’d rather be someone else’s belonging than die. That was especially true in the Northern Territories. On top of its difficult climate, the people living here were mostly impoverished. If one couldn’t find some kind of job, they risked starvation or death by hypothermia.

On top of that, it was actually fairly easy to quit, at least in theory. Since a slave was sold for money, they could also be bought

with money. One could save up the coin to purchase themselves, and be free after that. The amount required depended on a number of factors: the country of residence, how many years the slave had been kept, and how much money had been spent on said slave. There were even some nations where slaves weren't allowed to have wages.

We had bought Julie for a ridiculously low price. Although we had taught her a number of different skills, she could easily buy her freedom with two hundred Asuran gold coins and still have some cash left over. Not that we really wanted to let her go, mind you. And there was something more important that bothered me.

"I cannot believe she would do such a thing without speaking to me first..." Zanoba dropped his gaze, a shadow falling over his face, which made it difficult to make out his features.

I could understand his shock, though. We had done the best we could for Julie. She was in a horrific state when we bought her, but we gave her food, clothes, a warm place to sleep, educated her, and taught her practical skills. We even gave her a wage. We'd bought her for a specific reason; Zanoba, being a Blessed Child, couldn't create the art he wanted himself. I also wanted to mass-produce Ruijerd figures in the future. We'd been pretty strict with Julie, hoping to eventually fulfill those goals, but we'd never been cruel to her.

Of course, if Julie really wanted to be free, we would release her. That didn't lessen the shock of finding out she was going behind our backs to get the funds to do so, though. It was like she didn't trust us at all.

"...No," I muttered to myself.

Being a slave was no walk in the park. I had never been a slave before, so it wasn't right for me to belittle the struggles they faced. Having seen Linia's predicament for myself, it was much easier for

me to imagine what some of them went through. Anyone would be stressed out by not having true personal freedom. They couldn't really say what was on their mind or do the things they wanted to do.

"I thought we'd done right by her, but I guess maybe it was too hard on her being a slave this whole time," I said.

She had only recently started the transition to adulthood. Perhaps that had led her to contemplate her future more seriously. No doubt she found herself faced with a number of worries—was it really okay to keep making figures as she had been? What would happen in her future?

It was also possible she'd grown fearful of being a grown man's slave now that her body had started to mature, regardless of how much of a gentleman Zanoba was. Given their master-servant relationship, Zanoba showed little hesitation over stripping her—much like he had during period scare not long ago. Julie might still be young, but that still had to be embarrassing and scary for her.

"But if that's the case, what will happen to our dreams?" Zanoba wondered aloud. "You have paid no small sum yourself to help raise her, haven't you, Master?"

The amount I had contributed was nothing compared to Zanoba's investments. In fact, I was a little worried thinking about just how much he had poured into her development. It wasn't just gold, it was time and effort.

"Whatever the case, Julie is a person like anyone else," I said. "If she's that eager to free herself, then I don't feel like it's our place to stop her."

"Ngh..." Zanoba grunted and crossed his arms over his chest, still anxious. He continued to groan quietly for a while after that.

It was probably difficult for him to come to terms with it. Despite my stance on letting her go, it wouldn't be easy for him to give up on his dolls and figures, hence the intense contemplation.

Well, how should I go about convincing him then?

Thanks to the Zaliff Gauntlet, he had the fine motor control to not crush things now, and even if he did release Julie, he could perhaps still commission her to do work for him. Those would probably be the best arguments.

"Hm..." I hummed to myself, still waffling back and forth.

Zanoba finally turned toward me, as if he'd reached his decision.

"You are right," he said. "Julie has worked hard under our care. Perhaps the least we can do is grant whatever wish she has."

That was a little unexpected. Knowing Zanoba, I figured he would refuse to back down. After all, this meant losing the person who had been doing her utmost to make figures for him every day. I guess that even with his strong penchant for dolls, he couldn't treat her like a machine after living with her for so long. He'd even given her a name similar to his little brother's.

"Well, let's go back for now. We should ask Julie what her intentions really are," I said.

At this point we were only jumping to conclusions. The most important thing was what Julie wanted. If she'd really intended to free herself without saying a word to Zanoba, though, I would have to give her a good talking-to. I understood that wasn't an easy topic to bring up, but some things needed to be communicated.

And thus we returned to Zanoba's dorm room.

It was ten minutes by carriage and, for reasons beyond my imagination, Belfried decided to accompany us. "I want to see that figure one more time," he'd said.

I wasn't buying it. His pockets jingled and jangled, filled with coins, which was a clear indication he hadn't given up on his desire to purchase the figure from Julie. I had a hard time believing Zanoba would willingly part with it if it really was as phenomenal as Belfried claimed. Though I guess Zanoba might not share Belfried's profuse adoration for it. Everyone had their own likes and dislikes, after all. Still, it was good that Belfried intended to negotiate for what he wanted. He seemed like quite the eccentric, but he was at least a proper merchant.

"I have returned!" Zanoba declared, thrusting his door open without bothering to knock.

On the inside it was the same as I remembered. Zanoba's lover, the bronze statue of a nude woman, was nowhere to be seen. And of course, neither Julie nor Ginger were in the midst of changing when we strolled in. Actually, Julie was conspicuously absent.

"Welcome back, Master!" Julie came dashing out from one of the inner rooms.

Scratch that, then. I guess she is here.

She had a steel knife in her hand, used for chiseling stone. Apparently she wasn't using the workbench in the main room and had instead been practicing her craft elsewhere. Or perhaps hiding it, as the case might be.

Zanoba must have realized the same thing. Julie showed no signs of being panicked by our abrupt return, however. She actually seemed more delighted than I'd seen her before. If she was really plotting to buy her freedom and make her escape behind Zanoba's back, then being able to smile this innocently was some impressive acting. Also very unsettling.

All I can say is, women sure can be scary sometimes.

"Oh!" Her face clouded over the moment she spotted Belfried, and she retreated a step as if panicked.

Oh? What's this, hm? Did she see Belfried and realize that someone privy to her secret was now here?

"Hey there, Julie. Thank you for coming by the other day."
Belfried grinned ghoulishly at her.

A shudder ran through Julie, and she shot an entreating look at Zanoba, begging for help. Zanoba hummed under his breath and started toward her. He crossed the gap between them in no time and he stared down at her. Julie glanced anxiously at him, waiting.

"Julie... Do you wish to stop being my slave?"

Her eyes shot wide open.

Chapter 11: The Other Slave (Part 2)

HALF OF JULIETTE'S LIFE had been stained with despair. She was born to a dwarven couple and literally given the name, "The child of Bazar of the Holy Steel and Lilitella of the Beautiful Snow Ridge." In dwarven custom children were not given names until they reached seven years of age, so there was nothing strange about her not having one of her own. Back then, Juliette's parents referred to her as "our baby" or "our beloved girl," and she thought nothing strange of it.

But enough of that. Let's talk about Bazar and Lilitella. They were a little different from other dwarves. Most dwarves lived on the Millis Continent, in the southern part of the Great Forest along the foot of the mountains. They spent their time mining ore and using it to craft weapons, which were used for hunting, or sold to buy food. They were a rather simple race in that way.

Julie's parents, however, made their lot by traveling the world and crafting weapons and adornments in each region they visited using whatever materials they found there. Julie didn't know the reason they decided to leave their homeland to become nomads. Perhaps they had a good reason, or perhaps it was merely youthful indulgence that led them to venture away from their country of origin.

Whatever the case, one thing was readily apparent: the life they had chosen wasn't an easy one. Worse, they were already on the brink of bankruptcy when Julie was born. They'd dug themselves into further debt paying back debts they owed, and no matter how much they worked, they weren't earning enough to keep up with the interest. Their debt only grew and grew.

It wasn't that her parents' craftsmanship was lacking, they just didn't have the business acumen or foresight to make proper use of their talents. They thought that if they made a good quality product, people would be willing to buy it, which was why they took out loans for top-quality materials far beyond their means and tried to sell the products. The issue was, very few people would stop by a roadside shop to purchase something that exorbitant. It took the couple too long to sell their wares, and they sank deeper and deeper into the red in the meantime thanks to the interest on the debts. When they got lucky they would break even, until you figured in living expenses, and then it was back to being in the red.

It was honestly impressive how the two managed to live like that for so many years. They only managed because they'd figured out how to be self-sufficient. At times, they even resorted to cunning means to keep afloat, such as defaulting on smaller debts by skipping town to the next country. For several years the couple were desperate to scrape together a living, and there was definitely nothing enjoyable about it for them.

Julie's earliest memory was of her lying in bed and watching her parents hunched over, their backs turned to her as they worked on crafting something. They had their foreheads nearly pressed together as they fiddled with something in their hands. A cool breeze came through a crack in the room and caressed Julie's cheek. She cried out, and Lilitella smiled reluctantly as she hurried over and cradled her daughter in her arms, trying to comfort her.

The way they looked was engraved in Julie's mind even now—the tears threatening to well in Lilitella's eyes, and the dark, guilty look on Bazar's face. Julie couldn't recall ever seeing them smile, not truly.

A few years later her parents finally crumbled under their debts. They had skipped out on so many repayments that the loan sharks had all started putting them on blacklists, making it impossible for

them to borrow any more. Without the means to buy the materials they needed, they had no way of eking out a living, as it was winter in the Northern Territories by that point.

Their only choices were to die as a family or find a way to live on as slaves. With no other options readily apparent, they chose the latter.

Despite their tough circumstances, Bazar and Lilitella were probably more fortunate than most. Dwarves had strong constitutions, and since Bazar was such a skilled smith, he found a buyer quickly. Lilitella did not have much of a longer wait; she was skilled with her hands, could create beautiful adornments and repair various objects and clothing, and she had experience looking after children. Neither of them would die, even if they were ripped apart from one another. There were still people out there who needed their skills.

Except for Julie, of course, who was the most misfortunate of their family. She was too young to be of much use. She could hardly even speak at her age. She filled no one's needs, and so there were no buyers to take her. Day after day she stood at the edge of the slave market, staring down at her feet. Even the slavers were growing troubled over what to do with her. Slaves were still people like anyone else, which meant the slavers had to feed them, give them a warm place to sleep, and make sure they stayed healthy.

The one lucky thing was that Bazar and his wife had managed to sell themselves to the slaver Febrito, who was one of the bigger slavers in the trade. He had secured himself a prominent spot in the market, and he had a reputation for quality merchandise. That was why they kept Julie and looked after her even though she had failed to attract any buyers, instead of abandoning her on the side of some road.

That was where her luck ended, though. Even Febrito didn't have the luxury of caring about what he considered defective goods in his warehouse. His treatment of Julie gradually grew sloppier until he gave up on dragging her out to the sales floor altogether.

Despite how young she was, Julie knew no one needed her. She also knew that her parents had abandoned her. Worse, she knew that she would probably suffer from the cold and starvation in that cage until the sweet embrace of death finally took her.

Julie wasn't particularly bothered by the idea of her life ending. None of her memories were of anything good. She was born into poverty and spent her whole life with an ache in her belly. Her meals consisted of soups with bitter grass and old meat on the verge of rotting. She'd tried her best not to get in her parents' way, loitering in corners and spacing out the whole time. Every day was as bland and meaningless as the last. The only decent memory she had was of a time when her parents managed to sell one of their works for decent coin. Her father let her have a little sip of alcohol at the time. It was an atrocious grog, mixed with all sorts of things. But as a dwarf tasting liquor for the first time, Julie thought it was absolutely delicious.

Julie had no desire to live. She didn't dream of finding happiness for herself. She had no idea how that might even happen. That was why, when those two men appeared before her, she couldn't picture anything good coming from it. In fact, she was positive something new and awful was on the horizon.

"Do you not want to live anymore?" one of the men had asked her.

Yes, that's exactly it, she'd thought at the time. I want to die.

"If it's that bad, should I just end it for you?"

A part of her felt relieved. *Finally, it will be all over.* No more cold, no more ravenous hunger. Her dark life would come to an end.

The man asking her this question had a blank expression. He was so utterly unreadable that she got the impression he really meant it—that if she nodded, he'd take her life as easily and quickly as he breathed. His eyes were far too serious for it to be a joke. But the more she studied them, the more something strange bubbled up inside her. It was almost like he was really trying to say, "You have enough life left in you to give this another shot, don't you?"

Of course, if he actually said so, she would have probably shaken her head and insisted she couldn't go on. But he spoke not a word, silently staring back at her.

It wasn't like Julie didn't consider it as an option. It was simply that the following words passed through her lips unbidden.

"I don't want to die."

Nothing in her memories made her actively want to live, but it wasn't as though she truly wanted to die.

That's right... I don't want to die.

After they washed her body of all the grime, put her in expensive clothes like she'd never worn before, and fed her the most delicious food she'd had in all her life, they finally said...

"From today onward your name will be Juliette."

They had given her a name. Hearing it, she smiled. Julie didn't even know why she'd done it, but she did.

It was only afterward, upon reflection, that she realized—at that moment, she finally felt like all the misery she'd experienced in her life was at an end. Her smile then must have been from relief...or so she thought.

Life as a slave was far different from what she'd imagined. Granted, her imagination was limited due to her narrow life experience, but she heard how the other slaves in the slave house lamented all that happened to them. She naturally expected her despair to continue.

She spent her days looking after Zanoba and learning earth magic so she could conjure and craft figurines. There were so many things she had to remember, so many orders rained upon her, and if she didn't adhere to the rules and keep promises she'd made, they'd get angry with her. It was tough work for someone so young. It didn't help that she was a slave at the university; the other students treated her poorly when Zanoba wasn't watching.

Even so, she'd experienced worse before being sold into slavery. They kept her fed, let her use warm water for her baths, and gave her a cozy place to sleep. Most importantly, her master, Zanoba, was incredibly kind to her. He might get angry, but he would never yell at her. He was always extremely patient and made himself absolutely clear when communicating with her, despite not sharing a common tongue in the beginning.

"You don't belong to me," he would say. "You are my master's slave."

That was a phrase he repeated the first few months she lived with him. Honestly, he probably believed it. To him, Julie was simply on loan. That was why he was so polite to her, not as he would be with a guest perhaps, but more like he would be with a servant or maid. Julie was a hopeless mess on her own and couldn't do anything, but Zanoba never looked down on her for it; he taught her every single thing she knew. How to clean, how to look after figurines and dolls, how to do laundry, how to keep dolls and figurines organized, how to fold clothes, proper table manners, how to wash figurines and dolls. Zanoba was pretty independent, despite

being royalty. Thanks to that, Julie learned to look after him in no time at all.

Then she had to learn the language and skills for her craft. Rudeus was the one primarily responsible for teaching her that, and he never lost his patience with her. Even when she struggled to retain vocabulary or grammar and shrunk in fear of his reproach, he kept his voice calm and kindly tried to figure out what was giving her difficulty. He was strict in his own way, however, making her repeat the same thing over and over for days until it finally stuck.

To be frank, Julie wasn't too fond of Rudeus in the beginning. Partly because he resembled the villain in a fairy tale her parents had told her when she was younger, but partly because his words from when they first met left such a lasting impact. She knew he could end everything at the drop of a hat. If it suited him, he could rip her from the life she'd grown accustomed to. That thought made it difficult for her to relax around him.

Fortunately, that feeling soon faded. Rudeus didn't do anything to her even when she failed to meet his expectations. In fact, he actually showed her great consideration and smiled at her. Any anxiousness she felt gradually receded until she was fully comfortable around him.

Zanoba was probably responsible for that as well. He always ate meals with her, slept nearby, and whenever she got sick or injured or even felt a little off, he would immediately rush to fetch a Rudeus or a healer. When she experienced her first period the other day, he tried his best to be there for her even though he had no idea what he was doing. Panicking and fretting, at a total loss, Zanoba had truly treated her as if she were his little sister.

Julie actually had no idea if he actually had any siblings or, if he did, what kind of people they were. Zanoba never spoke to her about his family. On the other hand, Zanoba gushed daily about whatever

figurines or dolls he'd spotted in the market, or about ones he had in his possession. He always looked genuinely happy when he did so. Perhaps he'd never had someone to share his hobby with before, but it was also natural for someone to enjoy talking about their passions. Julie guessed the reason he hadn't spoken of his house or family was because it wasn't an enjoyable conversation for him. She felt the same; she didn't really want to remember what her life was like before she became a slave.

Zanoba spent each night—and sometimes the afternoons—babbling on and on about dolls and figures. He had a great breadth of knowledge across a variety of fields, all of it accurate and precise. Thanks to him, she gradually became more learned as well. Every time she showed off the skills or knowledge she had learned, Zanoba would be pleased and praise her, which made her even more eager to study.

Ginger was strict with Julie when she arrived, particularly when it came to etiquette, clothing, and manner of speech. Julie's life didn't really change that much despite this, especially since Ginger didn't treat Julie like a slave; she regarded her as a colleague serving Zanoba.

As the days went on, Julie found something precious of her own—her work making figurines. It certainly wasn't a job she had wished for. It was only something she'd started because, as a slave, her master had ordered her to do it. If she was honest with herself, however, it was pretty fun.

Zanoba was frankly terrible when it came to the craft aspect of figurines, but he taught her whatever he could and provided tools if she needed them. That was how she slowly built up her skillset, one new technique at a time. The more she improved, the better she could make things exactly as she envisioned in her head.

Zanoba was unerringly delighted whenever she completed a figure, but on occasions where she excelled he didn't shower her with mere praise but allowed her to drink fine alcohol as well. As a dwarf, alcohol was like life's nectar to her. It heated her whole body and made her heart feel light and airy. It made the dark memories from her early childhood grow dim enough that she could really bask in how enjoyable the present moment was. Those feelings transformed into the energy she needed to keep working hard each day, and provided the motivation to start on a new figurine.

It brought Julie a great deal of delight to feel her skills improve and to see her creations bring someone else such joy. It was the first time she'd ever experienced such a thing, and it helped her devote herself to figure-making. She poured all her effort into making figurines to show Zanoba. He was normally overjoyed, although he would offer strict criticism sometimes. When that happened, she would make the next one with greater care, devising ways to improve on her past failures. Sometimes the end product would be a little better and sometimes it would be a little worse.

So passed the days thus, over and over. Julie's life was peaceful and enjoyable, and she was grateful to Rudeus and Zanoba for providing her with that. She earnestly prayed she could continue being with them forever, making her figurines as she did. At some point, making those figurines had transformed into her very identity.

On an ordinary day among the many happy ones she'd spent in Sharia, Julie finished a figurine just as she always did. However, this one was a little different—nothing dramatic, of course, just a small difference. Naturally, since she'd made it using the same techniques she'd used on the others. She conjured the base of the figurine with earth magic and chiseled away the excess until it was of a uniform size. Then she used her knife to perfect the shape, while her magic took care of polishing the rest. That was her regular process.

This time, however, she noticed that something was off once it was finished. Or rather, there was nothing off about the figurine at all. That was exactly what bothered her. The figurine was practically perfect. Her skills were still only at the intermediate level, so ordinarily she'd flub something in the process. It was only natural; these figurines weren't life-sized figures of people but miniatures that didn't maintain the exact proportions or anatomy. And yet this one lacked any of those expected flaws. It was well-balanced—the arms and legs had natural curves, the surface was cleanly polished, and even the more intricate details were carefully tweaked to perfection.

Most importantly, you could tell with a single, cursory glance that the figurine was gorgeous. Julie had no idea what in particular caused it, but she remembered this peculiar sensation. When Zanoba showed her the figurines he kept carefully stowed in the very back of his dorm storage area, she had felt something similar. Simply put, they were masterpieces.

When Julie realized what she was feeling, something indescribable bubbled up from the pit of her stomach—an emotion she couldn't put a name to. She never dreamed she would be able to create something like this. She thought it would take many more years before she ever crafted something equivalent to a masterpiece. No—truthfully, she wasn't confident that she'd *ever* accomplish such a thing. For her to achieve that now, out of nowhere, was unbelievable.

It wasn't like she'd made this with a few simple hours of work. She'd devoted a considerable amount of time to it. She should have finished it more quickly since she used the full extent of her magic while making it, but it had taken a whole month. She used every bit of knowledge and experience she'd accumulated in creating this one, but still: never in a million years would she expect it to turn out this well. She didn't think herself capable of such a thing. If someone

were to tell her to do it again, she doubted she could manage it. But there was no mistaking it: the figurine in her hands was something of her own creation.

Emotion washed over her, and soon enough, a face popped into her mind—an oval-shaped one with glasses, belonging to an altogether plain-looking mature boy—Zanoba.

I have to show this to Master, she thought.

No doubt Zanoba would screech at the top of his lungs and circle the room gushing when he saw it. She also knew he'd shower her with praise, too.

I have to let him see it immediately!

With that thought in mind, she picked up the figurine, intending to head right for Zanoba. The problem was that he was on the outskirts of Sharia working on adjusting Rudeus's Magic Armor at the moment. If she made a dash for it, she would be able to reach him before he headed home. That would guarantee they wouldn't miss each other.

Julie paused at the door, lips pinched in thought as she held the figurine in her hand. It was a top-quality piece. That much she was sure of. Every cell in her body screamed that this was a masterpiece. But could she really show it to Zanoba like this? He'd be delighted, sure, but upon consideration, all the other masterpieces he'd shown her were carefully tucked in wooden boxes lined with beautiful fabric.

Every few days, Zanoba would open the boxes of his most prized figurines to check in on them. He always wore a look of deep anticipation as he pulled free the lace holding the box shut. His face would light up when he saw the figurine inside, his touch ever so delicate as he lifted it up and placed it on his desk, admiring it with a breathy sigh.

Yes, a box. A necessary component in amplifying a masterpiece's quality.

Julie glanced around her work area. She looked at all of the work tools and supplies she used for figurine making, but nothing there resembled a box. Since her magic supplied all the necessary materials for her craft, as per the style Rudeus had taught on her, she didn't have supplies she could use to make a box with. She did, however, have a white linen bag. It jingled when she picked up. It wasn't too heavy but it had a respectable weight. Tucked inside were some copper and silver Asuran coins.

Zanoba paid Julie a wage for all her work. She couldn't quite remember when that had started, but he insisted she take it in case she ever needed something suddenly. Lately, he'd been paying her a particularly generous amount. Ginger was none too pleased, insisting, "I don't see why it's necessary for her to have money," but Zanoba ignored her protests. His insistence on paying her made her suspect Grand Master Rudeus had said something to him.

Julie pondered this deeply. This was *precisely* the sort of situation where she needed something suddenly.

She grabbed the money and headed to the artisan quarter. The place she was headed was none other than Belfried's shop. Zanoba had dragged her there numerous times before, so she knew just how much he respected the quality of Belfried's work. It was why she decided on purchasing a bed that would suit her figurine so she could present it to Zanoba.

Alas, things did not turn out the way she had anticipated. The price was far steeper than she could pay. The products featured in his store were beyond her means with her current income. That was only natural since his pieces were made for nobility. Shocked as she was at the price tags, she refused to give up and tried to barter with Belfried.

Zanoba was one of Belfried's valued clients. He didn't purchase any dolls, but he did have enormous praise for the "beds" that Belfried made. He would bring his own figurines and have Belfried construct specially made beds for them. The better the quality of work he brought in, the cheaper Belfried was willing to go with his prices. That was why she'd hoped to get a deal she could afford by showing him the figurine she had.

Things didn't go the way she'd hoped this time, either. Well, no, that wasn't entirely correct: her plan was actually on point. The moment Belfried laid eyes on her figurine, his excitement skyrocketed. He screeched like an inhuman creature and scrambled back into the depths of his shop, coming back with an enormous sack of gold coins. He immediately used it to plead with her to sell to him.

"I would be more than happy to make a bed for her," he said. "I'll make one so grand that she can sleep in warmth and comfort at my side for the rest of her life! You'll find no one more suited to keeping her than me, especially with my skills at bed-making. I'll put that beautiful girl to rest and let her sleep peacefully on a one-of-a-kind cushion! Now, please! Be a dear and accept my offer!"

His eyes were unnaturally wide and drool dribbled from his mouth as he pressed in on her. Naturally, that scared her. Her entire body trembled. Julie instinctively shoved him away and made a break for the door. Belfried gave chase, but fear propelled her little legs as hard as they could go. She slammed into a shelf on her way to the door and sent the contents scattering to the floor, but she didn't look as she made her escape. Unfortunately for her, Belfried also ignored that and continued charging after her, screaming something incomprehensible as he did so.

Somehow, Julie managed to shake him off her trail and made it back to the dorm room, huffing and puffing. Her body continued to tremble in fear for a while afterward. She feared he might kick the door down at any moment and come stomping in after her. Luckily,

that didn't happen, and Zanoba returned later, which helped her regain her composure.

Julie couldn't go back to that shop now, not after what had transpired. So what else could she do? That night, she puzzled over the matter until she at last remembered something that Rudeus had told her. *"If you need something and you don't already have it, just make it."* She couldn't remember when or why he'd said that, but regardless, they had purchased her for that very purpose: to craft things. And now, she had earth magic and the tools necessary to shape whatever she conjured and polish it to perfection.

The very next day, Julie began using her supplies to make a box. She conjured the basic shape with her earth magic, then used her mana and tools to trim it down. She'd done this hundreds and thousands of times before. It didn't matter that it was a box instead of a figurine in the initial phases, at least. Completing the project was difficult, though, since the more intricate details required a different process and skill set. She was still not done after several days of work: maybe about seventy percent through. It was impressive progress considering she'd never done anything like it before, however.

As she crafted her box, a memory from her younger years came back to her. She saw her parents' faces, dimly lit in their dreary, cramped little house. She honestly didn't have many fond memories of them. They were often yelling at each other over money or otherwise looking forlorn. The only good thing she could say about them was that they did work hard. Night after night, with only a single candle for light, they slowly whittled away at something. Her father was normally boisterous during the daytime, but when night came, he was deathly silent as he wove metal together into a chain-like end product.

What stood out most in Julie's memories were her mother's ornaments, carved out of wood. She could whittle a block of wood

into the most beautiful lily. Julie couldn't remember what her mother had eventually put those lilies on, but she vividly remembered the flowers themselves. With those memories as a guide, she carved lilies into her own box. Seeing it gradually approach completion made each day more enjoyable than the last. Surely Zanoba would be pleased, wouldn't he? She wondered how he would express his delight. Would he gleefully screech the way he normally did? Or would he squint so hard that his eyes vanished into his cheeks, showing more muted joy? The more she imagined it, the more her heart hammered in anticipation.

As has already been written many times, Julie was truly grateful to Zanoba and Rudeus. She was also satisfied with her current life. She wanted things to continue like this. That was her wish.

"Julie... Do you wish to stop being my slave?"

Those words cut deep into her heart.

She had a bad feeling the moment she saw him walk in with Belfried in tow. After all, the two were quite good friends, and she *had* shoved Belfried and fled his shop. When she knocked over one of his shelves in the process, she might have also damaged some of his merchandise. Only now did she realize how incredibly rude she'd been. She expected Zanoba to be angry with her. He never yelled at her, but he had been cross with her on some occasions. He was especially strict when she'd done something wrong. Sometimes he would even punish her, to make sure she understood what she did was wrong and to not make the same mistakes next time.

Whenever Zanoba got angry with her, Julie would frantically try to right the wrong. Usually that was enough to fix things. In fact, Zanoba and Rudeus were always quick to forgive her. Why, then, did she panic? The answer was simple. Oh, so utterly simple.

Julie pursed her lips and thought it through. She was convinced she'd upset Zanoba over her treatment of Belfried. If she had

damaged his beautiful merchandise, of course Zanoba would be angry about it. Those were expensive goods produced for the nobility, which would mean a great personal loss to Belfried if they were broken. The cost would probably far overshadow any price she would fetch if they were to sell her.

This was much worse than she'd anticipated. Even Rudeus was involved now, and they were considering letting her go. That was her guess.

Maybe it would have been different if it were just her and Zanoba. Maybe it wouldn't have ended up like this if not for her run-in with Belfried. Maybe she wouldn't have felt so much pressure if Rudeus hadn't been present too. Perhaps, she could have calmly considered what he was saying and answer truthfully that no she still wanted to be at his side.

Alas, that was not the case.

Julie's vision went white, her mind spinning in circles as she tried to rack her brain for a response. What should she do in this situation? She had to do something, didn't she? Her thoughts wandered to the way Belfried had acted at the shop and the price he'd offered her for her figurine.

In a desperate attempt to cling to her final hope of salvaging this, Julie ran back to her room. It felt like the world was closing in around her. Her legs were unsteady as they carried her and her hands kept trembling, but she somehow managed to reach under the bed and pull out the thing she'd hidden there—the figurine, the very masterpiece she'd made herself. The one thing Belfried desperately wanted.

Julie gripped her creation in her hands and hurried back to Zanoba and the others. She walked right past him and sank to her knees in front of Belfried.

“I’ll give this to you, so please, *please* forgive me!” Tears and snot started pouring down her face. The first thing she had to do was subdue his anger, which was why she’d brought out her figurine and offered it.



Rudeus and Zanoba were both flabbergasted by her actions. The former, in particular, never dreamed she would have such an exaggerated reaction to their query. He assumed they should gently broach the subject with Julie, since it would be difficult for her to admit she no longer wanted to be their slave. That's why he was caught off guard when Zanoba waltzed up to her and outright blurted the whole question.

And now things had come to this. Of course he was utterly floored. The only person present who wasn't was Belfried. He'd planned to negotiate a price with Julie after their other discussions were dealt with, but when the object of his desires was suddenly thrust in front of him, he joyfully reached for it.

"Hm? Oooh! You'll allow me to have it? Ah, well, if you insist!" His fingers stretched toward it.

"Wait." Someone grabbed his hand before he could snatch up his prize.

"What's the meaning of this?"

Rudeus was the one who had stopped him. All traces of confusion and surprise had vanished from his face, and instead he looked both angry and on guard. "Why is Julie sobbing and begging for forgiveness?" he demanded.

"I-I'm afraid I haven't the foggiest," said Belfried.

"Well, nor do I, but would you really be satisfied getting your hands on a figurine you want for free? Don't kid yourself. You know that's way too good to be true."

"True, when you put it like that," Belfried admitted with a reluctant nod. "I would...hm? Um, Master Rudeus? The strength of your grip is...rather painful."

Thanks to the Zaliff Gauntlet, Rudeus' normal strength was amplified to an impressive degree. He held Belfried so tight that the

latter couldn't pull away even if he wanted. Worse, Rudeus's grip was slowly tightening. A cold sweat beaded on Belfried's forehead.

"No matter how chummy you are with Zanoba, that's no excuse to rob an innocent little girl of her figurine. You got that?" Rudeus glared at him.

"I truly meant what I said, I haven't the faintest idea why she's doing this... Um, Master Zanoba, won't you help me out?"

Both men glanced at Zanoba, who had been frozen in place for a whole minute now. His eyes were glued to the figurine in Julie's hands, and he hadn't moved so much as an inch. From the look on Rudeus's face, he was probably thinking, *Zanoba? Oh no, don't tell me you somehow died standing up?! Or something along those lines.*

Fortunately, Zanoba wasn't dead. As proof of that, his body shifted very, very slowly, almost as if time itself was trickling by at a snail's pace. He turned toward Julie and stared at her. Rudeus and Belfried were struck speechless as they watched him. They gulped as they waited for him to react. Zanoba's expression was utterly ghastly. Terrifying, in a single word. Even Julie noticed the change in his demeanor. She turned to face him and mumbled, "I'm so sorry."

In that instant, Zanoba jerked forward and slammed down onto his knees in front of her. He reached for her hands—or, more precisely, for the figurine cradled in her hands—and only stopped himself a hair's breadth from touching it.

"Master," she gasped.

"It's incredible," he said with a shaky breath. His praise didn't stop there; it was almost as a dam had broken. "It's...absolutely stunning. This is... It's... Words fail to express its magnificence! From the very top of its head to the tips of its toes, it's breathtakingly beautiful. I would be at a loss to pinpoint its precise strengths, but its posture, the fingertips, and the small wrinkles in the clothing... It

raises the quality to a whole other level! And it all fits together perfectly! Oooh!”

The way he was gushing about it, he probably longed to take the figure in his hands and study it from every angle, but for whatever reason, his fingers refused to grasp it. They remained suspended in the air, trembling. He wanted so badly to touch it but couldn't. It was almost as if the figurine was so divine that he feared touching it.

“So why then, Julie...” His words came out strangled. “Why?!”

“Huh?” she gasped back at him.

“Why did you try to give it to Belfried without even showing it to me first? Have I done something to offend you? I don't understand—you have always shown me every project you have completed before!” Zanoba started sobbing, big, ugly tears streaking down his face. Were they tears of frustration that he couldn't have this particular figurine? Or was he saddened by Julie's betrayal? Rudeus rudely suspected it was at least sixty percent the former, but we'll ignore his offensive thoughts for the moment.

“I suppose you really did want to raise the money to buy your own freedom? If that's the case, why did you not speak with me first? I would happily pay three hundred golden coins for this figurine! No, perhaps I couldn't pull together the funds immediately, but I swear I will find a way if necessary! I stake my honor on it! And you should be familiar enough with me by now to know how willing I would be to pay for it!”

“Um, uh... Master, um...”

“Or is it that you fear I might try to use my influence over you to steal it? I must admit, in retrospect, that you have crafted a number of figurines for me without proper compensation. I reasoned that it was fine since you're a slave and you were still inexperienced at the time, and even though you have improved immensely recently, I still haven't given you the pay you deserve!”

Zanoba continued to lament, holding his head in his hands as he gazed up at the ceiling. "I am so sorry, so terribly sorry, Julie. Allow me to apologize. I'll bow in apology however many times it takes. I may not be able to offer you the same price that Belfried has, but in exchange, as your master, I will grant whatever wish you have! Thus, I must beg you, please...allow me to have it!"

The way he pleaded was similar to how Belfried had behaved before, but with Zanoba, she didn't feel fearful at all. That was because she knew he was showing consideration not for the figurine but for her. He most certainly wasn't angry with her, that much was clear. It wasn't that he was trying to expel her.

The moment she understood that, some other emotion welled up inside her. Tears filled her eyes and soon left warm trails down her cheeks, but this time she wasn't crying out of fear or desperation.

"Yes, I understand, Master," Julie said. She never had any intention of rebuffing his request to begin with. Though she sniffled through her tears, she managed to smile at him.

"Ooh, thank you, Julie!" Zanoba grinned back.

The atmosphere between the two was slightly awkward but tempered by warmth.

"Can someone please explain to me how things even came to this?" Rudeus asked with a sigh.

Zanoba and Julie exchanged blank glances.

They managed to resolve the misunderstanding quickly. By the end of the conversation, Rudeus and Zanoba were immensely relieved, and even Julie looked more relaxed. Belfried apologized

profusely, and in spite of his longing gazes at the figurine, he took his leave.

Fortunately, Rudeus was very tolerant when people made mistakes based on misunderstandings. He quickly forgave Belfried, apologized for gripping his arm so tightly, and offered Julie and Zanoba a troubled smile before leaving for his own home.

Ginger returned right as the other two were leaving. When she heard about what had happened, she scolded Zanoba, saying, “You treat her so well and have given her such good education, one would be hard-pressed to believe she was actually a slave. There’s simply no reason she would try to buy her freedom without saying a word to you first. It’s discourteous of you to doubt your subjects like that, Your Highness.”

Zanoba didn’t really listen to her lecture, though. He was too busy studying the figurine Julie had given to him. He’d set up a pedestal in the middle of the room, placed the figurine on it, and now walked around it in circles to scrutinize every angle. At times he would smile proudly, at others he would breathe a sigh, and then he was grinning like a fool again. He was having the best time of his life. Ginger may as well have been talking to herself for all the good her speech did her.

As for Julie, she kept watching Zanoba. She smiled with relief, cheeks colored slightly red.

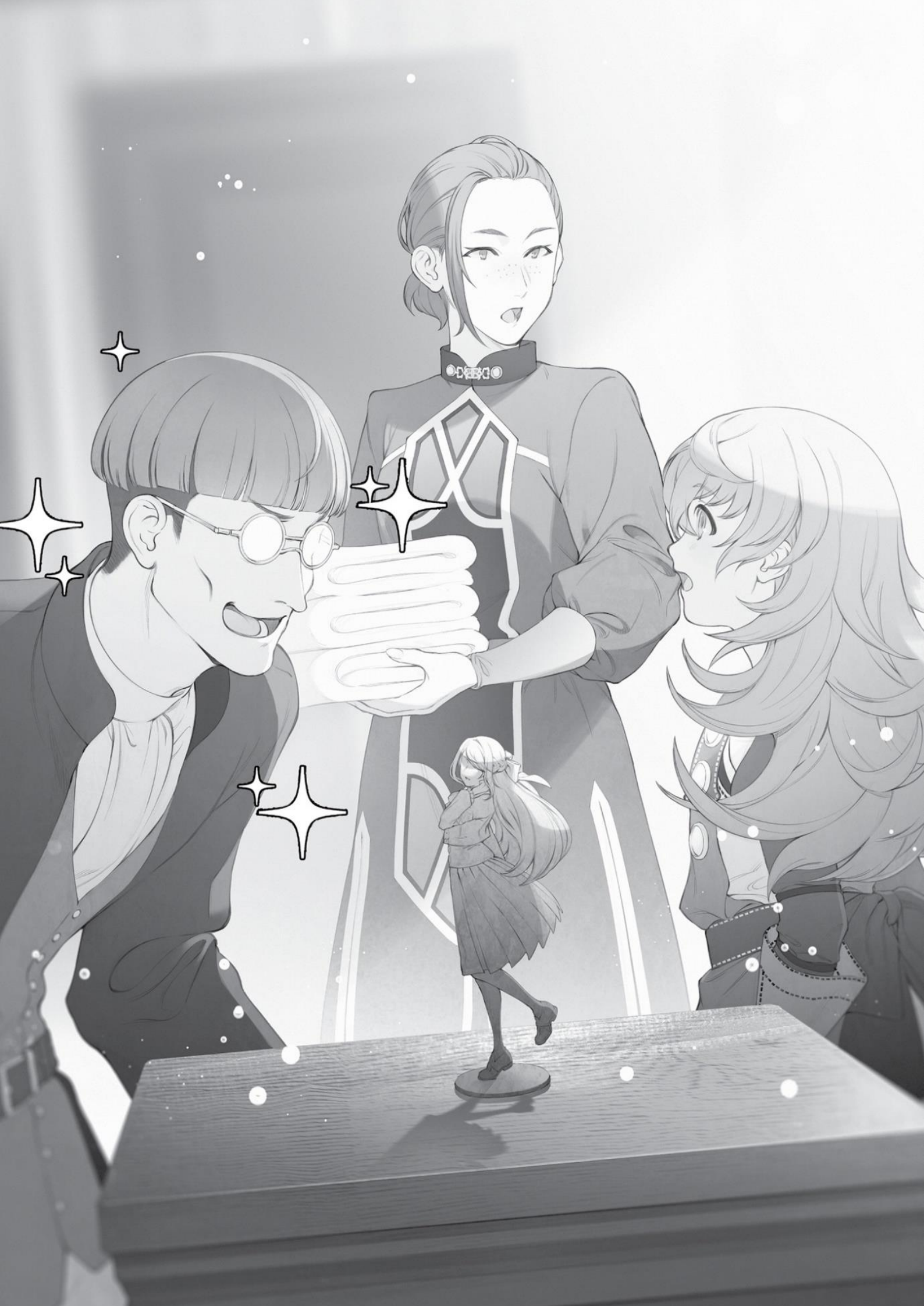
“Julie,” Zanoba said after a while, turning toward her. “This is an incredible figurine. You have done well. I never dreamed you had this level of skill.”

“Yes! It’s really only a coincidence that I managed it. I doubt I could reproduce this level of quality again.”

Zanoba cocked his head. “What are you saying? This masterful craftsmanship is a product of your hard work. You made every inch of it carefully—beautifully, even. Perhaps some parts only turned out

perfect by coincidence, but at least half of it is a product of your own abilities.”

“...Thank you. I’m going to continue honing my skills!”



“Very good.” Zanoba nodded, pleased. “And also, Julie, I meant what I said earlier. If there is anything you desire, you need only speak it. I will do whatever is in my power to grant your wish.”

“Um... Let me think on that a little bit longer,” she said awkwardly, feeling embarrassed by all of his praise.

Ginger glanced at them. “Your Highness, I understand how much you love your figurines, but it is nearly time to eat. Julie, help me with preparations.”

“Oh, of course!” Julie responded. She thought the moment might continue for eternity, but Ginger’s interjection brought her back to reality. Perhaps the other woman was a little cross about being left out.

Julie did as she was told and began helping with meal preparation as usual. Zanoba watched the two, his eyes narrowed. His life right now was rather simple, far removed from the opulence of palace living. Yet he could spend all day fiddling with his figurines and no one would get mad at him. Plus, he had someone at his side that could make them for him, which provided him with the constant source of new figurines. Nothing could be more ideal.

It would be wonderful if I could keep living like this forever.

“Hm?”

Suddenly, he noticed a sealed letter sitting nearby the door. Julie must have received it on his behalf while he was out. He casually strode over and picked it up, then checked who the sender was.

“Ah...”

The happy expression disappeared from his face. He slit the envelope open, pulled out the letter, and glanced over its contents.

“...I suppose there was no way it could ever last,” he muttered. The envelope slipped through his fingers and fluttered through the

air before coming to rest on the floor The seal of the Shirone Kingdom seal was stamped upon it.

Chapter 12: The Next Battle

I AWOKE TO THE MELODY of a tree sparrow's song.

"Ngh...morning already?"

I stretched and let a yawn spill out as the bones in my back cracked audibly. Beside me slept a girl with blue hair, bathed in the morning sunlight that poured through the window. Other people called her Roxy, but I called her God. Beside her was a tiny baby with similarly blue hair. As the child of a human and a god, naturally, this baby was Perseus...kidding, of course. It was our daughter, Lara.

Leo, the Sacred Beast, was curled up on the floor just beside the bed, looking for all intents and purposes like a white puffball. Ever since we got official approval to keep him from the beastfolk, he seemed even more smug than usual. Or maybe I only felt that way because Linia and Pursena were constantly acting subservient to him. I'd thought him awfully attached to Lara from the start, but I never dreamed it was because she was the savior. That was a startling revelation for sure...though on the other hand, I could probably have seen it coming. It was hard to believe our little girl was that special. As proud as that made me as her father, I would have to do my best not to let it show. Showing favoritism wasn't good, and I didn't want to put a sad look on Lucie's sweet little face.

"Ngh," Roxy groaned from beside me. "Oh, good morning, Rudy..." She scrubbed at her eyes groggily and sat up. Since she often breastfed Lara, her shirt was left hanging open, her chest completely exposed. I couldn't allow myself to hungrily ogle them, lest such blasphemy end in me losing my eyesight completely. *Ah, but I can hardly help myself. It's like they're begging me to look at them. Oh, God on high, have mercy on me.*

“Huh? Why is Lara here...?” Roxy wondered, glancing down at her sleeping daughter with hooded eyes, as if she hadn’t quite woken up herself. “Did you bring her in here, Rudy?” She tilted her head and reached down to gently stroke her baby’s head.

“Don’t you remember bringing her in here last night yourself?” I asked.

“...I did?”

After we had a little romp in bed and fallen asleep, Lara began crying in the middle of the night—a rather rare event for her. Roxy groggily pulled herself upright and tottered out of the room. She changed Lara’s diaper, breastfed her, then came back here and rocked her to sleep before nodding off herself. Leo had, as always, stuck by her side her the entire time. If she didn’t remember, though, it was no big deal.

“Fwah...” Roxy still looked groggy as she let out a yawn.

“I’m going to leave to do my morning training,” I said.

“All right. I’m off today, so I’ll probably sleep in with Lara for a little while more.” As soon as she finished uttering the words, she collapsed against the pillows once more.

“All right, sleep well.”

“I will,” she muttered, before immediately drifting back to sleep.

I slipped away and got changed before starting down the hallway. A thought suddenly occurred to me, and I paused at Sylphie’s door to peek in. She was still sleeping with Lucie right beside her. They both looked like they were happily enjoying Dreamland.

We had given Lucie her own bedroom, but she slept with Sylphie at night. Perhaps it might be nice occasionally to sleep together, the three of us, all sprawled out in a line. But unfortunately, I had a strong libido and being with any of my wives

usually led to sex. There was no way I could do something like that in front of Lucie, especially since she was old enough to remember.

Right now, I was satisfied by seeing them happily curled up together. I left without a word, nudging the door shut. Since I'd already checked in on them, I decided to peek into Eris's room too. She was always up in the wee hours, so I figured she'd be wide awake by now.

"Urgh... ugh..." squeaked a voice.

I spotted a silhouette on the bed. There was a girl, holding her hands over both ears as her whole body trembled. Her breasts were enormous, but she didn't have red hair. Those ears she was holding were dog ears, and she had a tail. Her eyes were normally half-mast and sleepy-looking, but right now they were welling up with tears.

"Oh, Boss. Morning," said Pursena.

After the incident in the Great Forest, she had returned with us to Sharia. *Someone* was extremely happy to see her, and surprise, surprise, it was Eris. The moment she spotted Pursena, she licked her chops and said, "That's an incredibly cute girl you brought back with you!"

Linia shuddered when she saw Eris's reaction, but Pursena didn't share that sense of foreboding. Instead, she puffed out her chest and grinned proudly, "See how great I am? Boss's wife only had to take one look at me before deciding she likes me."

A mischievous gleam danced in Linia's eyes as she nodded eagerly and egged Pursena on. "Yeah, it sure is incredible, mew. Only you could win the favor of the Berserker Sword King that quickly, mew. It's too bad. I wish I could be as lucky as you, mew."

"Hahaha! You couldn't pull it off," Pursena shot back at Linia, getting a little ahead of herself. She wagged her tail as she approached Eris, who promptly scratched the back of her ears and complimented her tail. The amount of touching Eris did was a bit

intense for a first encounter, but perhaps because Pursena was a dog-type beastwoman, she simply wagged her tail and said, “I really am wicked. My charms are so overwhelming, I’ve even captivated the Boss’s woman.” She shot me a sidelong glance.

I forced a smile back at her. Normally, I would have found her attitude annoying, but since I already knew where this was going, it was hard to do anything but gaze at her sympathetically.

Seeing how willing Pursena was, Eris sensed her opportunity to pounce. “You must be lonely sleeping by yourself now that you’re back here. I’d be happy to sleep with you occasionally!” she offered.

Pursena nodded eagerly. “At this rate, it’ll only be a matter of time before I’ve climbed back to the top.” She didn’t notice Linia snickering at her, but that sealed the deal: she would periodically spend her nights with Eris.

Pursena soon discovered for herself the bone-breaking power of Eris’s embrace, which was precisely why she’d ended up in her current state.

“Urgh,” she groaned. “My...my chest hurts so much...”

Since she was suffering, I used my magic to heal her. Her breasts were as voluptuous as I remembered. I’d already spent a passionate night with Roxy, so I was more than sated for the moment.

“Thank you,” she muttered.

I left her and proceeded downstairs, heading for the entrance. A wooden sword leaned against the wall, which I grabbed before heading out. Eris stood just outside, arms crossed and her stance wide. Her stomach was noticeably swollen thanks to her pregnancy, but she still looked like a most intimidating guard.

“Eris, good morning.”

“Morning, Rudeus.”

She was in good spirits today. I could tell by the look on her face. Apparently she'd deeply enjoyed cuddling Pursena through the night.

Pursena and Linia currently lived close to our mercenary headquarters. They shared an apartment much like the one Cliff lived in, and the fact that they could cohabit like that was proof of their good relationship. They took turns coming over every night to check on Leo. They were caretakers in name only, but I was pleased to not have them living here, lest it cause the same friction with my family. Eris would alternate between the two, periodically summoning someone to her room to act as her sleeping pillow. Linia tried her best to escape, but Eris wasn't about to let her go. Not until her debt was paid. Whenever one of them was dragged off to her room, they'd shoot pleading looks at me, praying for intervention, but I was actually pretty jealous of them. It would be nice if Eris would occasionally call me to her room. I was part of her harem too, after all. It'd be great if she'd show me some love. Perhaps she'd be more open with her affections once she'd given birth.

Wait, aren't things usually the other way around? That's odd. I thought I was supposed to be the backbone of the family... Oh well.

"So," I said, "what're you up to?"

"I was thinking about our baby's name. I say he needs a valiant one."

Was that something people normally thought about while standing outside at the crack of dawn? I really thought she was trying to be a guard dog or something. "A valiant name?" I stroked my chin. "I guess that might be a good idea if we're having a boy."

"I was thinking Ars, Aldebaran, or Kalman."

"I think those are a little *too* valiant."

She'd literally named a bunch of famous heroes from the past. They were all good names, of course. Still, I feared giving our child such an old-fashioned name might lead to them getting bullied.

“What are you thinking, Rudeus?”

“I’ve been thinking of girls’ names. Like Alice, Fran... I think a beautiful, refined one might fit best.”

“You’re going to give our son a girl’s name?” Eris tilted her head, genuinely puzzled.

“I just think that if you do end up having a girl, it’d be pretty sad for her to be given a male name because we haven’t thought up any alternatives,” I explained.

“It’s definitely going to be a boy!” Eris sniffed at me and turned away.

Just to appease her and stay on the safe side, it might be good to come up with neutral names that could work in any case, like Maki or Kaoru. *Uh, wait, those wouldn’t work. Those aren’t recognized names here.*

“Well, I’m going to get some running in, so I’ll catch you later.” I could give the matter more thought while I jogged.

“All right. See you later,” Eris said.

She had recently stopped practicing with her sword, at least. She was probably around six months pregnant by now. I wasn’t sure whether she was finally conscious of the baby in her belly or if it was pure instinct that stopped her from pushing herself so hard. Eris still didn’t seem like a mother at all, but she was going to have this child anyway.

With all sorts of thoughts racing through my head, I started my morning jog.

The whole family gathered for breakfast. Lilia and Aisha served everyone, while Zenith sat with a vacant expression, with Norn beside her. Thanks to a stroke of fortuitous timing, my days off coincided with Norn’s visits home. Lucie was right next to her, legs

dangling adorably from her chair. Sylphie sat on Lucie's other side and nagged at her to sit properly.

Roxy was across from them, eyes still heavy with sleep as she nursed Lara. The baby shared her drowsy expression as she suckled away. Eris looked dignified as she sat neatly in her chair, happily stroking Pursena's head, which rested on her lap. Pursena looked utterly exhausted and put up no protest, but the moment she saw food being carried over she sat up, tail wagging. She was a simple one, no doubt about it.

My spot was right next to Eris, at the very end of the table—the head of the table, one might say. Not that such a thing existed in our house. Our table was enormous, yet it felt awfully tiny with so many people around it. We had run out of rooms for everyone, and it wouldn't be long before Lara started getting bigger.

I guess Norn might already be moving out by the time that happens. I wondered what she planned to do once she graduated. Aisha seemed likely to stay here even after she reached adulthood.

"Norn?" I said.

"Yes, what is it, Big Brother?"

"What do you plan to do after you graduate?"

Norn stared blankly. "I...haven't really thought about it?"

"Oh, okay."

Well, she was still a minor and only a fifth-year at the university. Plus, she was busy being student council president. Maybe it was only natural that she hadn't given it much thought yet.

"Um, Big Brother?"

"Yes?"

"If—that is, hypothetically speaking..."

"Mmhmm?"

“I were to say I wanted to become an adventurer...would you oppose it?”

An adventurer, huh? Norn becoming an adventurer... Well, she was decent enough with a blade, and after five years of training, her magical abilities had grown. She’d probably make a fine adventurer. I could only guess she’d come to idolize them, having heard from Paul about his adventures.

That didn’t mean I wasn’t worried, though. This was Norn, after all. She might do something utterly clumsy at some point and die on the spot. Of course, given how utterly adorable she was, I was sure boys would swarm her if she did become an adventurer. I couldn’t keep myself from imagining the worst, since my work involved aiding adventurers caught in sticky situations.

“I wouldn’t oppose it, but I would worry,” I said. “Do you really want to become an adventurer?”

She shook her head. “No, not particularly. The thought just popped into my mind.”

I wondered if she was downplaying the truth. Once she graduated, she could surely find steady work that paid better than adventuring did. Perhaps she was looking for something besides money. Still, I wanted to respect any decision she made as much as I could.

Once she finished clearing her plate, Norn grabbed her things and started for the door. “Thank you for the food. I’m off to school.” Even though Roxy and the other professors had the day off, Norn still had duties with the student council to attend to. It had to be rough.

“All right, have a good day.”

After we all bid her farewell, Norn left for the university.

It wasn’t until she was gone that Aisha suddenly blurted out, “Personally, I’d be opposed to it. I don’t see any way she could hack it as an adventurer.”

“I think you should let her do whatever she wants to do,” said Sylphie. “It’s a big thing to come up with a dream for yourself.”

Lilia shook her head. “I also oppose it. Miss Norn is Master and Mistress’s precious daughter. She should marry into an appropriately respectable family and live a secure, peaceful life.”

Eris shrugged. “I say let her do it. Her swordsmanship is still lacking, but being an adventurer is fun.”

Everyone started weighing in with their own opinions the minute Norn left. Of course, this wasn’t a matter we could decide via family meeting. It was just idle discussion.

“You can become an adventurer anywhere in the world. Even if we all opposed it, she could run off and become one without saying a word to us if she wanted to,” Roxy said. Her words had real weight, since they were spoken from experience.

And that was that for breakfast.

After that, I accompanied Aisha and Pursena to our mercenary HQ. Pursena’s work mostly consisted of assisting Linia, which made her more of a secretary than anything else, but she took the title of “assistant vice chief” for herself. She sat in her office wearing all black and sporting sunglasses. Even though she didn’t smoke cigarettes as she did it, she still seemed to be enjoying herself. *Maybe I should buy special hats for the leadership...*

“Okay, you guys work hard,” I said.

Pursena nodded “You got it, Boss.”

“Today we’re going to rake in the dough again!” Aisha declared.

“Just be sure you don’t do anything too wicked,” I warned.

Aisha handed me a list of all our syndicate's—err, I mean, uh, mercenary band's members. There were about fifty names in total. She'd marked out which ones were particularly good at handling paperwork. I planned to show the list to Orsted so we could select whoever had the lowest chance of being one of the Man-God's apostles. I'd then interview that candidate, and if they seemed serious enough, I'd appoint them to help out with office administration and document filing.

"If that's what you need, wouldn't it be better to just employ me instead?" Aisha offered.

I couldn't take her up on that. I was confident she would do phenomenal work, of course—the problem was the risk of her glimpsing Orsted directly or otherwise falling under his curse, which might turn her hostile toward him. If she vehemently opposed me working for him, it would make it really hard to continue what I was doing. Aisha normally spent her days idly, but she could produce results almost instantly if she put her mind to it. By the time I caught on to what was happening, she'd already have Orsted drowning at the bottom of the ocean. That's how it played out in my mind, anyway. I realized it was probably exaggerated concern.

"I want you to look after the mercenary band," I said, as an excuse.

After I left the office, I went straight to Orsted and reported on all that had transpired this past month—such as how I'd appointed Linia and Pursena heads of my mercenary band, along with Aisha who acted as their assistant. He expressed no opposition to my choices.

"Such a thing never existed in my past loops. Go ahead and continue doing what you're doing," he said. Far from being displeased by it, Orsted seemed amused by the goings-on. He also

gave me permission to hire people to work at this office, and selected acceptable candidates from my list. Perhaps he was actually excited about it all.

“Are you sure Linia and Pursena are fine the way they are, though?” I asked. “It’s not going to have too much of an impact on the way things play out in the future, is it?”

“As long as one of them becomes the matriarch in the end, it will have no big impact on the future.”

Well, Pursena had managed to cling to her position as a potential candidate by the skin of her teeth at least. And although the others had thoroughly bashed Linia, she could probably fill the matriarch role in Pursena’s place if she was of the mind to do it. I could throw in my support and help her out if needed.

“Most of the people who become involved with you have their destinies dramatically changed in the process. Therefore, I am unable to say anything with any certainty,” said Orsted.

Urgh. Well, pardon me. I’m just trying to live a normal life, you know.

“Anyway,” I said, trying to change the topic. “I never dreamed my daughter would be some kind of savior. Did you already know about that, sir?”

“No. A different man has always been the Sacred Beast’s partner in the past.”

That was only natural; Lara didn’t exist in the other loops, after all.

“But,” Orsted continued, “judging by what you told me, it seems clear the Man-God made a concerted effort to keep you and Roxy apart. So I suspected she had a strong destiny.”

I guess that means our little girl knocked someone else from their rightful place and took the seat herself, huh?

I cleared my throat and asked, "By the way, about the guy who was originally supposed to be the savior...what was he set to accomplish?"

"He was the man who would eventually go on to defeat Demon God Laplace."

"Oh, okay... Are you sure everything is alright since he's not going to be the savior, though?"

He shook his head. "It doesn't matter. Laplace is someone I will have to kill anyway. It's true that I owed the Sacred Beast and his partner for what they did for me, but they aren't truly necessary pieces on the board."

My understanding was that he'd fought Laplace numerous times through his multiple loops, and the so-called savior had been a staunch ally each time. However, Laplace wasn't so formidable that he needed that ally to win.

"I suppose that means Lara is also destined to fight Laplace eventually?"

Orsted shrugged. "Difficult to say, but there's no doubt that she'll be a big hindrance to the Man-God."

We could only guess that she'd play a big role in defeating the Man-God in the future, but nothing was set in stone. Most of the things happening in this loop were completely new to Orsted, after all.

"I suppose that means he may continue trying to target her in the future?" I mumbled. That was my true worry right now. Of course I was concerned, knowing someone might be after my adorable little daughter.

Orsted shook his head. "That's precisely why you summoned the Sacred Beast. He has a strong destiny himself, so the Man-God will struggle to interfere with either of them."

“...Okay then,” I said reluctantly.

“Besides, if anything were to happen, I have no intention of leaving your family to die. There’s no need for you to worry.”

He was doing his best to reassure me, so I should feel at ease for the time being. *I’ll just have to focus on doing what I can do.* Yes, all I had to do was continue preparing for the next big battle as I had been. I still had some lingering anxiety about Lara, but simply worrying wouldn’t solve anything.

“All right,” I agreed finally.

After that I left our office and headed to the school, wondering if Zanoba and Cliff’s research was proceeding apace. I hoped we could lower my Magic Armor’s mana consumption a little more. The way it was right now, I was the only one who could use it.

On the other hand, if we made the mana consumption rate too economical and the Man-God’s cronies stole it for themselves, we’d be in some real trouble.

I sighed. *Anyway, who should I visit first?*

I suspected Cliff was hard at work trying to make a second child with Elinalise. For whatever reason, those two always went at it hard in the morning. They probably had sex in the morning, then spent the day recharging before doing it again at night, day after day. Or so I suspected, anyway.

The way they’re going, I’ll be shocked if Cliff doesn’t turn into an emaciated shell.

That left me with one option: to go see Zanoba first, as I usually did. That way I could check in on his research progress with the Magic Armor and test it out. After that, I could tell him about the mercenary band I’d created and consult him about my plan to recruit some members as store clerks. After that, I could grab lunch and go

to see Cliff. If he'd completed another one of his prototypes, we could take it to Orsted and give it a trial run.

Yep, that sounded like a good plan. With that in mind, I headed for the research building.

"Moron!" boomed a voice out of nowhere.

Okay, I won't deny being a fool, but it's awfully rude to badmouth someone like that all of a sudden. I'm not that stupid.

"You should understand, shouldn't you?!"

Yes, yes, I know. I was just messing around. I know whoever's saying all this isn't directing it at me.

I searched for the source of the shouting and found it rather quickly: a group of five men and women stood on the stair landing, arguing with one another. Shockingly, I knew every single one of them.

"You're basically going to your own death!"

The person who'd been shouting the entire time was Cliff. He'd grabbed Zanoba by the collar of his shirt and was angrily tearing into him. Elinalise was standing directly behind him, cradling their baby with a troubled look.

Zanoba stared at Cliff with a cold look in his eyes, not budging an inch. Ginger hovered behind him, sending Cliff a weak, pleading look. Julie was at her feet, staring at Zanoba with watery eyes, as if she might break into tears at any moment. Even for an argument, it was odd to find them like this.

I wonder what could have happened. I can only hope it's not another crazy misunderstanding like the one that happened yesterday.

"Zanoba, Cliff!" I called up.

They flinched and turned my way. Cliff's look was entreating, while Zanoba remained unreadable. No, it went beyond that... It was

the first time he'd ever looked at me like I was an insignificant insect. But I had seen that look before in the past. When was it again?

"Master, your timing is most fortuitous. I was about to go visit you."

"It's good you came, Rudeus. Help me convince Zanoba!"

Both Zanoba and Cliff spoke at the same time. Zanoba pulled a face and somewhat violently pushed Cliff away. He didn't seem to actually make use of his strength, but as a Blessed Child with monstrous power, he still managed to knock Cliff off his feet and onto his ass. His expression turned apologetic for a split second, but he didn't bother to verbalize it, instead making his way over to me.

Zanoba stood slightly taller than I did, and his gaze seemed to pierce right through me.

"...What happened?" I asked.

"I was hoping to entrust Julie to your care. We may have bought her using my money, but she was always your slave to begin with," he said dispassionately.

Julie looked like she was about to cry—no, she was already crying. His words were the last straw that sent her over the edge. She clenched at the hem of her clothes and lowered her gaze. The tears rolled down her cheeks continuously, splattering on the ground below. Her shoulders trembled as shuddering sobs escaped past her lips. I caught her whispering something as well. "You promised...you would listen to my request..."

Poor thing.

Zanoba, if this is the start of a whole new weird misunderstanding, I'm not gonna be very happy with you. Understand me? I won't be making any more figurines for you.

"So you plan to leave Julie and go where, exactly?" I asked.

"Home. I have received a royal command to return."

A royal command, huh? In other words, orders from the king? But why would Cliff be so opposed to it, if that was all it was? He was hardly the type to dissuade Zanoba simply because the guy's graduation was six months away.

"My younger brother, Pax, has successfully wrested power, killing my father and older brother and taking the crown for himself."

I gaped at him. "Huh?"

Pax? The seventh prince that took Lilia captive? *Or wait, was he the sixth prince?* And he managed to throw a coup d'état and ascend to the throne? *Wait, that means he's king now, right?*

"The insurrection left his forces exhausted, and now a foreign power has moved in to attack. I was summoned back to help fortify our defenses. Thus, I will be taking my leave for a little while."

He spoke as casually as if he were suggesting running to the convenience store to grab a quick snack, but I *knew*, based on what he had told me, what he really meant. That next battle I kept trying to prepare myself for was already upon us, and far quicker than I had anticipated.

About the Author:
Rifujin na Magonote

Resides in Gifu Prefecture. Loves fighting games and cream puffs. Inspired by other published works on the website *Let's Be Novelists*, they created the web novel *Mushoku Tensei*. They instantly gained the support of readers, and became number 1 on the site's combined popularity rankings within one year of publishing.

"One needs a home they can go back to if they want to keep their motivation levels up," said the author.



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